

EPISODE 183

[INTRODUCTION]

[0:00:02.6] PF: Welcome to Episode 183 of Live Happy Now. This is your host, Paula Felps, thanking you for joining us here today. Now, if you ever feel like thinking positive is just too difficult sometimes, then this episode is for you. This week, we're talking with Dr. Sasha Heinz, a developmental psychologist and life coach who focuses on the science of getting unstuck. One way she does that is to look at how to think neutrally when it's just too tough to think positively.

So let's listen to how she does that and why it can be so effective.

[INTERVIEW]

[0:00:33.7] PF: Well Sasha, welcome to live happy now, I'm really excited to talk to you today.

[0:00:38.4] SH: Hi, it's so good to be here.

[0:00:39.7] PF: Well, you know, what's really exciting about what we're going to talk about today is that your approach to positive psychology is something I think a lot of people are going to be excited about. They're going to be happy to hear, because we hear all the time about positive thinking is good for us or that it's necessary for us but you kind of talk about how neutral thinking is an option and it's a good step for some people.

Can you kind of explain that philosophy and what you mean?

[0:01:05.1] SH: Yeah, absolutely. I think that there's some research coming out of NYU with Gabriele Oettingen about rethinking positive thinking. But I mean, I really think in the self-help world right now, there's just this sort of resounding message of like the power of positive thinking and you just need to sort of lobotomize yourself and like take that negative thought and put in a positive one and that's really what we need to do.

But human brains just don't operate like that. You know, people talk about neural pathways like, "Well, it's just you know, there's a field and the cows have tread the path this way and you just have to redirect them in other, you know, in other way and then that pathway is going to just grow over." But that's just not at all the way that our brain works. Even if you haven't heard nursery rhymes for 40 years, if I say, "Mary had a little..."

[0:01:59.8] PF: Lamb.

[0:02:00.6] SH: Right? You cannot erase that from your brain, it's there. That's a very well-honed — it's a habit that's in your — "Mary had a little", lamb always follows those words, right? It's just not easy to just sort of plop in a positive thought and in fact, it can have a really deleterious effect because when we're thinking about like if someone, let's say that they have a lot of body shame and they don't like the way they look and so they're constantly criticizing themselves.

For them to go from like, "Ugh, I hate my legs, I'm overweight, I'm so fat," you know, for them to go from that to, "I love my body, I'm you know, I love the way I look, I feel great in my body." There's such a cognitive dissonance between the two that when the person is saying their positive affirmation like, "I love my body," there is that little voice in the back of your head, it's saying, "No you don't." Right? "That's just not true."

[0:03:04.1] PF: What does it do to us? You know, I've done some research and we've written about with Live Happy about how trying too hard to be happy actually has kind of a backlash on us and is this the same thing? When you're trying to use positive affirmations and your heart is not there and you're not feeling positive, does it have a negative effect on you?

[0:03:24.1] SH: Well, I mean, I don't know that it would have any additional negative effects beyond the already critical thing that you're saying to yourself but it certainly doesn't help. In some cases, I think the negative effect it could have is that it just sort of lose hope, right? You lose hope that there's a possibility of change, which I think is quite damaging when people, right? It's very hard to move forward and in your life if you're feeling hopeless about a particular area of your life that there is just no possibility of improvement.

But I think the truth is that mindset, the research on – this all comes from somewhere, it's not like this was just made up. There was a reason why people think, people say it's important to think positively, there's a reason for that and the reason for that is, the research on mindset and the effect of our thinking on our emotions and then by extension, our action, is profound. Our thinking has an enormous power.

You know, I think Alia Crum's research on even giving someone a diet shake that they think is one, it's exact same substance in both. One, they were told it was a diet drink, the other one, they were told was a milkshake, right? One was like very high in fat, high in calories, high in sugar, milkshake and the other one's like, you know, low calorie, no sugar, diet drink and they had the same group of people, they came in one week, they drank the diet drink, they took their – they drew blood and they looked at their cortisol levels and their hormones.

They looked at you know, ghrelin, leptin, and their hunger hormones and then they had them come in the following week, they drank the exact same thing but this time, they believed that it was a milkshake, a high calorie milkshake, an indulgence and they did the same thing, they did their blood work and what they found was, just believing that this drink was either high or low calorie, affected their hunger hormones enormously.

When they thought they were drinking something that was high calorie, they're ghrelin levels, ghrelin is the hormone that makes you feel hungry. Their ghrelin levels went way down and their leptin levels, and leptin is the hormone that makes you feel full, their leptin levels rose dramatically. It was the exact same drink that they're having with the diet one and when they drank that, their ghrelin levels didn't decrease as much and their leptin levels didn't rise as much. So the brain was telling their body, "You're not satisfied because this is not high in calories." It's amazing.

[0:06:08.7] PF: When we apply that to our mindset of positive thinking, how does that all work together?

[0:06:15.9] SH: The point is that you know, that's just one of many examples of how extremely powerful our thinking is; what we believe is enormously powerful. But the difference is that if our beliefs are extremely powerful but only when we believe them, right? If we don't believe them, they don't create, they don't kind of create an emotional resonance for us.

[0:06:40.6] PF: Right.

[0:06:42.4] SH: When you believe a positive thought, it has a profound, a wonderful, profound effect, right? But if you don't believe the thought, it's not going to do anything for you, which is why I think a lot of people feel disappointed or kind of – they think this sort of Stuart Smalley, positive affirmation approach doesn't work for them. They're like, "This isn't working, this is a bunch of hooey," right? Well that's why. They're just saying words in the mirror, you know? There's no emotional resonance with those words.

[0:07:15.1] PF: So then how does neutral thinking become the best step for them?

[0:07:19.9] SH: Yeah, so I think that as I said, really moving towards something that's more positive is absolutely the goal, right? We don't want to be criticizing ourselves. There's no upside to that. I think the more powerful way, the more effective way really to get there is to practice what I call neutral thoughts.

So I mean, there's many ways to do this but one example would be, you know, sticking with our body example but from "I hate my body", you know, it's way too far of a reach to get to "I love my body". Maybe the more neutral thought to practice would be, "I have a body", right? It's like, a little bit moving us a little bit in the direction of it's a neutral, neutrality, it doesn't feel as bad, it doesn't feel particularly positive, right? But it's not – it doesn't have that sort of feeling of like shame and self-loathing in the same way.

[0:08:17.2] PF: How do you learn to adopt a neutral way of thinking? Again, we've got that built in negativity bias and I love the fact that you're not saying, you don't have to go from that to positivity but then, how do you even get to that neutral plane?

[0:08:33.3] SH: Well, I think one of the best techniques to start with is in ACT. You know, acceptance and commitment therapy. There is a technique they call diffusion and really, the idea is, it's a mindfulness practice, it's noticing just noticing that it's a thought and taking that little step away from the thought. So just being – recognizing that you're the observer observing your own thinking. It could be just this tiny little tweak, so you're thinking like, "I hate my body. I

hate my thighs,” whatever it is. Then it’s, “I’m noticing, I’m thinking the thought that I hate my body.”

[0:09:17.6] PF: Interesting. That seems like that’s going to take some practice.

[0:09:22.3] SH: It does, it absolutely takes practice. What I think is so funny about my working on your mind is we have – If I said to someone, “Oh, if you want to be a great tennis player, just go read a book and you’re going to do it.” Everyone will be like, “You’re insane.” Obviously they know they have to get on the court, they have to practice, the shots, again and again. It’s just like three hours on the court, right? That’s just a given.

When it comes to our mindset, “I’m sorry, why is this not done already, why am I not, it’s not fixed: right? It’s like, “Well, no, you got to practice. It takes time.”

[0:10:01.1] PF: Well and another thing too, we see people who are naturally happy or we see what they portray in that they are very pleased with themselves and they’re content when in fact they may not be. I think there’s a little comparison going on too where we feel like it’s easy for other people but not for us.

[0:10:17.1] SH: Sure, totally, right. Oh yes, everybody’s inner world is fraught. I mean, let’s be honest. Everybody has a – I mean, I think it’s like this is the other – this is a great for me as a good neutral side. Everybody is human, right? Whenever I feel like I’m going through something, I’m like, I am just a human. This is what we do. That’s more neutral to me than “what’s wrong with me”, “why am I you know, whatever the myriad thought, negative thoughts or criticisms that I have, it’s like, “No, I’m human.”

[0:10:51.5] PF: What a useful tool because you point out it really helps reduce anxiety and stress. Can you kind of explain the mechanism in play there, because if it sounds in some ways almost too simple that it would actually help us reduce anxiety where we can just have a neutral thought?

[0:11:08.8] SH: I think that we just – what happens is that we’re trying so hard to kind of be positive, which is very difficult to do and I think that, it actually creates its own stress and anxiety that you know, it isn’t working. This feeling that I’m trying – you know, I’m reading all these

books, I'm listening to all these podcasts, I'm trying to change my – I know mindset matters, I'm trying to change my mindset but it's not working, right?

That can feel demoralizing but I think, you know, it's like you're trying to cross this river of doubt, right? You have a certain belief system about yourself and you're trying to evolve to another belief and crossing that river of doubt, you know, from the operating system, you know, 1.0 to 2.0 is hard. Right? It is like, called the river of doubt because as you're traversing this, it does not feel comfortable, it does not feel like you. The criticism feels very familiar and comfortable, right?

[0:12:13.6] PF: Yeah, that's like your life.

[0:12:15.3] SH: Wait a minute here. Exactly. One of the tools that I use with people is you know, what I believe, belief ladder, you're sort of, what's the goal belief, where would you like to get and we're going to climb wrong by wrong, right? So you can use techniques like it's possible to like your body, that could be a more neutral thought for you. I'm not there yet but it might be possible.

[0:12:44.4] DC: Interesting, it's kind of laying the groundwork and preparing yourself to get to that kind of feeling.

[0:12:51.3] SH: I'm becoming someone who loves their body. It's acknowledging that you're in process, right? You don't have to be there because I think that that sometimes the disconnect between like I am saying something that I am not really believing, it backfires and it ends up making you feel worse.

[0:13:15.9] PF: Right.

[0:13:17.0] SH: Right so you are not there yet. Not giving yourself that space to be in this middle round where you are working your way towards your belief that you want to really own.

[0:13:29.3] PF: So it just feels really non-judgmental too, it is very, very helpful.

[0:13:34.5] SH: Right absolutely and another neutral thought is maybe something like I – you do some speaking engagement or you presented at a meeting and you feel like it was a total flop, right? Like I failed instead of trying to, “Oh that is a negative thought, I shouldn’t think negative thoughts. I am going to make it into a positive thought.” Like maybe that doesn’t really feel authentic to you in the moment. It is not resonating with you but maybe you can be like:

“I failed and that’s okay” you could just add that “and that’s okay, right?” It’s like that’s more neutral. It is just allowing it to be without forcing into that it must be, it must be yellow smiley face.

[0:14:21.3] PF: Right and you know happiness and positive thinking is all a part of our wellbeing but your comment is that wellbeing needs to evolve into well doing and so I wonder if you will really quickly you could explain to us what well doing is and how you develop that and how people can execute that.

[0:14:41.8] SH: Yeah, what I really mean by that is I think is we all do things because we want to feel better right? I mean that is pretty much the motivation always and I think that we get attached to – I think we get overly attached. We hooked onto our negative thoughts. I think everybody is really well acquainted with hooking onto our negative thinking and the criticisms that we have about ourselves. But I think we can also get really hooked on our positive thoughts. We can be fixed about something that seems like a good thought.

I think this is what Carol Dweck is really showing us with her fixed mindset research that you can have a thought like “I am smart” and that is a fixed thought – it is a fixed mindset about that may not actually be that adaptive and may not serve you all that well because if you come up against a challenge and you are not succeeding at something, you know the only alternative to being smart is being not smart.

[0:15:43.3] PF: Right.

[0:15:44.4] SH: Right? So maybe that is not a thought that is all that useful either. So I think that the point is holding our thoughts loosely and recognizing like, they are just strings of words with punctuation in our brain; they’re not real. We think all sorts of things all day long. They are subjective ideas in our head.

So if we can hold them loosely and just observe them and then take action toward the things that we care about and value and take action despite some of those thoughts. Like holding the thought and still taking action that is where we are going to find a truly satisfying content life that feels meaningful and of substance.

[0:16:37.2] PF: That's terrific and where can listeners go to find out more about this?

[0:16:40.9] SH: There's two places. One is Instagram. I am on Instagram @drsashaheinz and also my website, which is www.drsashaheinz.com and yeah, but I think this is a really – it is important to understand because people I think really beat themselves up for feeling like they are not doing positivity well enough, right? It's crazy.

[0:17:09.5] PF: Right, yeah that is something we have to get better at. We have to fan the part of the positive journey is giving ourselves room to not always feel positive.

[0:17:19.1] SH: Exactly, like it is part of — negative emotions are very much part of the human experience for everybody and they are important.

[0:17:26.8] PF: Yeah because I know that sometimes people say, "Well I don't know why I am in a bad mood," it's like you never say, "I don't know why I am in such a great mood," you know? So okay.

[0:17:37.0] SH: Right, exactly.

[0:17:38.3] PF: Well Sasha I appreciate you spending time with us today. You've got some great things for us to look into. We are going to tell them more about where to get your workbook on our webpage and again, thank you being on Live Happy Now.

[0:17:50.2] SH: Wonderful, it is great to talk to you.

[0:17:52.4] PF: All right thanks so much.

[0:17:53.7] SH: Thanks, buh-bye.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

[0:17:58.7] PF: That was Sasha Heinz and if you'd like to learn more, please go to our website, livehappynow.com where you will find a link to her website and now, in honor of world kindness day, which is happening right now, that's right. Today is world kindness day. You probably didn't know about it but we did so we are bringing in Live Happy Editor, Chris Libby to see what he has to say about it and how we can make the world a kinder place.

[INTERVIEW]

[0:18:20.8] PF: Well Chris, we are going to talk about something we both love talking about and it is not work.

[0:18:25.9] CL: What is it then, Paula?

[0:18:27.8] PF: Big surprise. All right the world kindness day is coming up November 13th and so you are the kind of kindness guru there at Live Happy not just because you are such a kind person yourself but you have done a lot of interviews on it and I know you have written some stories on it. So you are really the perfect person to talk to about why kindness is just so beneficial for us.

[0:18:49.7] CL: Kindness, performing an act of kindness is really an interesting thing because if you do it, if you help somebody in a way and you don't expect anything in return, you are actually sacrificing a little bit of yourself — of time, money, whatever and so but we almost instinctively go there. So yeah, I think it is really important. In fact, it is one of the most core, I mean when you look at it as far as character strengths, kindness is right up there for overall happiness and joy.

It is one of the top five, it helps buffer against negative stress and trauma the more you practice it and even kindness to yourself is very important because it is good for your mental and physical health.

[0:19:30.9] PF: Well, we both have seen and this is just not our observation, that the world is a little less kind right now. You know how many times do we hear people talking about that not only within the walls of Live Happy but our friends and family, about the divisiveness and the anger and the instability that is going on. So if you are a kind person and you are trying to use that tool in the face of all this disruption, how does that work? How do you apply that to keep from not losing it?

[0:20:04.9] CL: Yeah, I mean just like with anything it takes work. I always like to say and I tell this to my daughter all the time, “Kill them with kindness.” It is better for you in the long run. If more people practice kindness then the world would be a much different place.

[0:20:20.7] PF: The experts that you’ve talked to and I know you’ve talked to several of them, this is twofold: one, I want to talk about kids because you have done a lot of work with that and you apply that but then also first of all I guess the experts, what do they say about developing your kindness in an unkind world? How do we go about practicing and implementing that?

[0:20:43.2] CL: First, in your family you have to model the behavior that you want and it takes work. You just have to realize that being less angry — there’s all kinds of things you can do. You can practice some mindfulness that reduces your reaction time to things so you aren’t getting angry as quickly. Just priming yourself and your environment with kind things, with kind sayings stuff like that, and you know it’s self-control and self-regulation.

Once you are more aware of yourself and aware that that’s how you act you’ll more likely to curb your behavior if you understand what you’re doing and you realize the effects that it has because emotions are contagious. Kindness is contagious but so is negativity and anger and so as long as you are aware of that and know like, “Wow, my behavior is making – so at ruining someone else’s day,” we hope that you would like to change that.

[0:21:43.1] PF: But sometimes we don’t. I mean let’s be honest, there are times when we’re mad at what that person said, what they’ve repeatedly said and we don’t have them to have a better day and we want to go toe to toe and we want to crush them. I mean, that is not very Live Happy but it is really true. So how do we get in that state of saying, “No that is not the route I want to go,” and adopting a kinder approach?

[0:22:10.1] CL: I think when you practice acts of kindness, random acts of kindness and you don't expect that you can return, you are really training yourself to look for the kinder things in life and when you notice that, everything is a little bit less harsh, I believe. If you're consciously keep track of the kind things that you are doing every day maybe even write them down. Say, "How many kind things have I done today?" or "How many acts of kindness have I seen other people do?"

The reason *Pay It Forward* became such a huge phenomenon that book, I mean it was a novel and in the late 90's and it quickly became a movie and it was printed in 20 different languages, something like that, is because I think people when they see that kind of behavior, good kind behavior they want to be able to, like the title says, pay it forward. Give it to somebody else because that act, it feels good to do that.

[0:23:01.1] PF: And that's good, once you start getting used to that little endorphin hit that comes from saying like, "I did something really good and I feel good about it and I did something kind for others." We know that really helps you and once you start getting used to that, I can see where it would become an easier more natural way of being.

[0:23:17.9] CL: Sure, yeah.

[0:23:19.7] PF: Well Chris this is always enlightening to speak with you. World Kindness Day, November 13th, even though Hallmark — Hallmark has not yet claimed it but it doesn't mean it's not a real hold so we can all get up there and be kind.

[0:23:33.0] CL: Yes.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

[0:23:33.7] PF: That's it for this episode of Live Happy Now. Be sure to visit us at livehappynow.com to learn more about today's podcast and if you like what you've heard here today and want to hear more, go to Apple Podcasts or wherever you get your favorite podcast, search for "Live Happy Now" and subscribe today so you'll never miss an episode.

That is all we have time for right now so please join us back here next week and until then, this is Paula Felps reminding you to make every day a happy one.

[END]