

EPISODE 186

[INTRODUCTION]

[0:00:02.8] PF: Welcome to episode 186 of Live Happy Now. This is your host, Paula Felps, thanking you for joining us today. Once again, the holidays are upon us, so it's time for peace on earth, goodwill toward men and most likely, a whole lot of stress for women.

This week, we're talking with Nancy Jane Smith, a licensed professional counselor and author of three books, including *The Happier Approach: Be Kind to Yourself, Feel Happier and still Accomplish Your Goals*. She has some great tips for managing the holiday hustle with your good mood intact. If you like your holidays to run a little bit smoother this year, let's listen to what Nancy has to teach us.

[INTERVIEW]

[0:00:37.0] PF: Nancy, I am so glad that you could come and talk to us today for Live Happy Now. First of all, welcome to the show.

[0:00:43.7] NJS: Thanks. I'm so excited to be here. This is great.

[0:00:46.5] PF: Well, we wanted to talk to you because this is the holiday season and it's a time when we're talking about happy holidays and being happy and being with family, but we also know this is a time when people are really stressed and all that happiness can take a back seat. What we wanted to talk to you is the holidays are getting under way, what are some of the things that we can do to prepare ourselves, so maybe this year we can actually enjoy them?

[0:01:13.4] NJS: Yeah, there are so many expectations that we put on – that are put on us and we put on ourselves for the holiday. It comes from all sides internally and externally. That's part of the problem is that it isn't – we think it's all external, but a lot of it is the pressure we put on ourselves to keep up with other people, to make sure it's perfect, to make sure everyone's happy and that can get us in trouble sometimes.

[0:01:37.2] PF: What is it that is causing the most stress, or unhappiness during the holiday season?

[0:01:42.3] NJS: I think it's the crazy expectations that that we need to have a Norman Rockwell Christmas and everything, even I was just reading The Oprah Magazine holiday issue before we got on this call, and it was just – everything in there is just perfect. We think, “Oh, we have to find the perfect gift and do the perfect decorating and everything. The perfect Thanksgiving meal, the perfect Christmas meal. Everything needs to be absolutely amazing.” That isn't how it works. That is isn't – life is messy.

[0:02:14.5] PF: I don't think even Norman Rockwell had a Norman Rockwell home. I'm suspecting. He probably painted that, because it's like, “This is what I wish it looked like.”

[0:02:23.8] NJS: Yes, exactly. I think, to let go of some of those expectations and to recognize how do – the question I always tell people themselves is how do I want to feel for this holiday? How do I want this holiday to feel? A lot of times, we don't care about the perfection. We don't care about that everyone's sitting around the table looking perfect. We care about we want to feel calm, or we want to feel peaceful, or we want to feel connected with our family members.

When we can keep that feeling in mind, when we start getting caught up on the fact that we had – we haven't found the perfect gift for our sister and we're driving to the fifth store in traffic, we can stop ourselves and be like, “Wait a minute, is this really what matters here? Is this really what's important?” Because our brains will tell us that it is when it isn't.

[0:03:11.8] PF: What do we do? You brought up a great point about the finding the perfect gift. What about the people who have recipients who do expect the perfect gift? You do feel that pressure, because I know a lot of times it is self-induced pressure. They really don't care. We do have those people in our lives who have a certain expectation of whether something's going to be good enough or not. How do you handle that?

[0:03:37.0] NJS: Well, some of that is recognizing you're not going to please everyone, which I hate that answer as soon as it pops out of my mouth. I think, because that's way easier said than done and I try to be aware of those tidbits that we give our weight, that are way easier said

than done. A stereotypical example of that is your mother-in-law, who you really want to impress and has really high standards for what a good Christmas meaningful gift is.

Just to recognize that you can do your best and that's all you can do, you're not going to hit the mark every time, you're going to get close, you're going to miss it. To be able to recalibrate that and keep your expectations in control is beneficial. When we start trying to mind-read everyone and figure out, "Oh, what would be the perfect gift for my mother-in-law?" I'm training to mind-read her and figure it out. Instead of being like, "I think my mother-in-law would really like this. In fact, I think she would love this," and that's enough.

[0:04:36.5] PF: Nice. What else can we focus on? Because as you mentioned, we do obsess on what we're not doing right. How do we turn that and focus on the things that are going right? What are some of the things that we should be looking at?

[0:04:49.9] NJS: I think back to that how do I want this to feel, to go back to what is it that I'm really looking for for my holidays, and so I can recalibrate at any one time. I can keep coming back to, will this matter a year from now? We were doing Thanksgiving and my aunt said, we were here for Thanksgiving for my aunt last year and she said, "Oh, no. Remember last year, the stuffing was really dry." We were like, "What are you talking about? I have no recollection of the stuffing." I mean, I ate a great meal and that was it. She's been obsessing about the stuffing since last year, because it was dry. To get that, reframe that to be like, does this really matter in a year from now? Will anyone remember? Will my mother-in-law even remember the gift I gave her a year from now. Probably not. That's just how our minds work.

[0:05:42.2] PF: It's really bad.

[0:05:43.5] NJS: Right, exactly.

[0:05:45.5] PF: That's like, give her a deer head or something and then after that, she'll always be happy with you.

[0:05:49.8] NJS: Exactly. Yeah.

[0:05:52.4] PF: Yeah. Much of what you deal with really is letting go of that perfectionism. Why is that so hard for us? I think women especially it's a difficult thing to do. Can you explain first of all, why it's so hard and then give us some tips for forgetting better at losing our perfectionism?

[0:06:10.6] NJS: Well, I think perfectionism is addictive, because it's never achievable. It's like you're constantly, "This time I'm going to do it right. This time it's going to be perfect." You think of a gambling addict who's, "This time I'm going to win. This time I'm going to win." That's the same with perfectionists. We have this belief system that I didn't get it right last time, but that possibility is always there that I can get it right.

On one hand to start reframing that to just give yourself some wiggle room. When you're in perfectionist mode, it's black and white. There's a right way and there's a wrong way and it's very rigid. Recognizing that life is gray, there's a lot of definitions of what a dry stuffing is, or what a good stuffing is. To give yourself some wiggle room to recognize, 10 people may eat this and they may think of it in a variety of ways. I doubt anyone is going to say it's perfect ever, because there is no such thing as perfection.

Then on the other side of perfection, it really – especially for people that have anxiety and a lot of people that have perfectionism have what I call high functioning anxiety, is perfectionism keeps us from really engaging with what's going on. If I have to create you'll find the perfect gift for my mother-in-law, I can be focused on driving from store to store and obsessing about that perfect gift. Then I don't have to engage with what's happening in my day-to-day life, because that is too stressful, so I focus on something completely out of my control, that I pretend is in my control. Does that make sense what I'm –

[0:07:53.2] PF: That makes perfect sense.

[0:07:54.5] NJS: Okay. Perfectionism gives us something. It isn't just all this evil thing that we're striving for something that doesn't exist. I think it's helpful to look at it from the other side be like, "Wow, how does my perfectionism protect me? In one way when I do Christmas dinner and it needs to be perfect, I'll stay in the kitchen and be doing the perfect Christmas dinner and I am not having to then engage with my family, because they stress me."

[0:08:24.7] PF: Oh, my gosh. I'm going to start cooking.

[0:08:28.1] NJS: I tell you, that's the secret. That is the secret. In benefit of cooking in the kitchen is you don't have to deal with the family.

[0:08:36.4] PF: That's fantastic. Let me ask you about family for a minute, because I think we're all crammed together and tensions are high. I think we fight with our family, but do we also fight more with our significant others during the holidays?

[0:08:50.6] NJS: Yes. Because it's so high, because it's the person that you're so familiar with, you can perform all day with family and then family and friends. You can go to a holiday party and put on your best face. Then you get home and you're exhausted and the person you're going to take it out on is your partner, because that's an easy place to put that aggression.

To remember that – to remind yourself this is my teammate and to approach it that we are getting through this holiday together and to be appreciative of your partner and to thank them. I think it's really important before the holiday starts when we get into the hubbub of it all, to have a time to talk, meet for coffee or have a glass of wine together and do a plan of how is this going to look? Where are the pitfalls going to be? What's the parties that I don't want to go to? How am I going to survive your work party when I don't know anyone? I have a huge family and we do a big Christmas gathering every year that goes on for three days. The most amazing time of year for me, but it's hell for my husband, to be honest.

[0:10:01.6] PF: Does he come from a small family?

[0:10:03.1] NJS: Yeah. Yeah, that didn't do this crazy pact with traditions. Everything has meaning and we're constantly reliving years past and it's just a hard thing to fit into.

[0:10:14.3] PF: Do you have to ask – do you have to wear matching pajamas?

[0:10:16.9] NJS: No, we're not that crazy.

[0:10:18.6] PF: All right. Okay. All right. I was going to do an intervention for him if he did.

[0:10:23.7] NJS: We're not that intense. I do do the same sadly. Blessedly in a lot of ways, I do the same traditions I've done my whole life. We haven't changed anything, so I don't know if that's a good thing or a bad thing. I have to be aware that that's hard for him. I need to be thanking him for doing stuff and showing up and being there and recognizing he's going to need a lot of breaks and he's not going to engage in all the activities I'm going to engage in. That's okay, because it's not his thing. Just giving again back to that wiggle room, I need to give him some wiggle room instead of being rigid that my partner needs to face the holidays the same way I do.

[0:11:04.1] PF: That's fantastic, because what's comforting for you and it might be comforting from one person can be completely overwhelming for something else, for somebody else. I love that point of bringing that up and recognizing that. How do you then create that game plan? I like the idea of sitting down with wine or coffee and actually mapping out a strategy and what are some strategies that you can use to as you look at those pitfalls and potential problems?

[0:11:31.8] NJS: Because it's all going to be a negotiation. I think some of the strategies are you – I'm going to take regular breaks, or I'm going to drive separately to your office party, so that I can leave when I'm ready to leave and you can stay and hang out with your friends, or I'm going to – these are the kids gifts. I'm going to get these kids gifts and you can get those kids gifts. Or I'm responsible for going to the kids' Christmas holiday parties, but you're going to be responsible for making sure that they get thank-you notes written at the end of the – after the Christmas gifts are done. Just divvying everything up.

What that requires is some honesty to be able to be honest with your partner and say, “Gosh, I just hate going to your holiday Christmas party and it stresses me. It stresses me for this reason, this reason and this reason.” Okay, so then as a team, how can we brainstorm that so it's not stressing you so much and figure out a way you can leave earlier, you could take a break or whatever that is?

Too often, we especially for a perfectionist, to bring it full circle, we try to say, “Oh, I can just put on the happy face and power through.” What this really requires is for you to be honest and acknowledge what really comes up for you around the holidays, what is hard for you and then rely on your partner to pick up the slack.

[0:12:52.7] PF: That is terrific advice. The one thing that I was thinking about as you were talking that, I know not everyone feels their spouse is going to get the right gift. They're not going to. What do you do in those cases where you want to divide and conquer, but you know that he is going to be at the mall on Christmas eve looking at the chia pet? I mean, you know that's going to happen. When you have those situations, how do you overcome those divide and conquer strategies? What do you do?

[0:13:25.8] NJS: Right. It's funny, just as an aside, my husband, we were talking about that I was getting ready to do this and he's like, "Well, you're going to have to talk about how we don't get the right gifts for [inaudible 0:13:35.0]." That was his first thing that popped into his head.

[0:13:39.4] PF: That's fantastic.

[0:13:40.9] NJS: I think that it is the – first off, you have to be honest. I know my husband love him to death. He's not going to surprise me with some beautiful piece of jewelry, unless I pick it out and say, "Here's the jewelry. Go buy it." Would I love him to be more spontaneous, or more creative? Yes. Would I love him not to be shopping at the drugstore on Christmas eve for my present?

[0:14:09.0] PF: Hey, cover as gift cards.

[0:14:10.4] NJS: Exactly. Yes. I have to recognize who he is and who I married and that he's not going to be able to do everything that I need him to do. No, he's not going to get me the perfect gift, but he is going to be the guy that's going to spend three days with my family at Christmas. That's a gift. Being honest about those trade-offs.

Also being honest, if I really – if that's something that's really important to me and I really want my husband to think about what gift to give me, then I need to be dropping him obvious hints and saying, "Wow, this is something I would really like. This is something I would really like." Then helping him pick up, "This is important to me. You need to figure out how to do this."

[0:14:58.8] PF: That's a great point, because I think as women sometimes we expect that they're going to know that we would really like this item. Then we end up disappointed and

they're disappointed, because they had thought they were getting us a great thoughtful gift and we don't like it.

[0:15:17.3] NJS: Right. Yes. Yeah.

[0:15:19.5] PF: We tend to think it's wrong if we tell them like, "This is what I really want." Can you correct that belief for us?

[0:15:30.6] NJS: I mean, partly I go back and I think common wisdom I was always told like, don't expect it. If he can't do it, don't expect him to do it. I think part of that is true, but I also think he can grow a little bit too. We can as a team again, I can't emphasize the team thing enough, as a team, I can say, "You know what? It's really important for me for you to get a gift. I'm going to give you five obvious hints through the holiday season. You have to pick one of those and go get it." Then I at least get my surprise, because I don't know which five he's going to pick and he gets to win in getting me a gift that I really want.

[0:16:10.1] PF: That's terrific. You avoid the Christmas Day fight, or silence, cold-shoulder that people sometimes have. That's fantastic. I love that strategy. Then everybody wins.

[0:16:21.0] NJS: Then also to give feedback, not on Christmas morning, but to say, "Hey, you did awesome. You totally hit it. Or next time, if you could get a small instead of a large, or whatever."

[0:16:37.3] PF: Or maybe not another toaster oven.

[0:16:39.4] NJS: Right. Yes. Or not the Kroger gift card.

[0:16:42.7] PF: Then what are we doing as we roll into these holidays and we're going to start getting exhausted. How do we set these boundaries so we don't exhaust ourselves?

[0:16:52.2] NJS: Well, I like to think of the – I have an analogy that I use and it's I ask the question how full is your glass. If you think about a glass of water, I say it's a glass of energy. Throughout the day, you will give to other people and that will empty your glass and you'll get from other people and that will fill your glass back up.

It is on us to make sure that we are monitoring that glass and filling it with things that fill us back up, so that I know if I'm going to go to my husband's Christmas party that's going to be an energy drainer. I have to have something the next morning, or later that night that's going to fill me back up. That constant and measuring where is my energy, where is my energy, can help in letting us know okay, I'm at the holiday Christmas party. I'm miserable. I need to go step outside and get some more energy. That's on us to set those boundaries and recognize.

When I go to the kids' school Christmas party, it is a killer. That just takes all my energy. Then I got a call on my teammate, my spouse to come in and do it differently and maybe he gets some energy from doing that, so he can take that activity.

[0:18:04.1] PF: A lot of it is knowing your strengths and your personality type and knowing theirs and creating that game plan of who's going to play what position during the game.

[0:18:15.0] NJS: Exactly. Yeah. It's also in the moment. We're at my aunt's house and I got up really early this morning and I it was 10:00 and I knew I was going to do this interview with you. I was like, "I'm going to go take a little nap on the couch." That was super hard for me to do, because I want to be with my family and I want to be together with them, but to recognize if I'm going to be able to do the activities later in the day that I want to do, I got to monitor my energy now. I got to take care of myself.

If you're a perfectionist, the last thing you want to do is admit, "Oh, I need to take care of myself," because perfectionist can do everything for everyone without even thinking about it. That's the shift that has to take place. I'm not a bad person if I have to rest here. I'm not a bad person if I admit I can't do that. To change that thought process a little bit.

[0:19:06.3] PF: For some of us, we tend to use the, "I have so much to do," kind of wear it like a badge of honor.

[0:19:13.7] NJS: Yes.

[0:19:14.5] PF: That's really detrimental, particularly during this time of year. How do we lose that habit? Because I know so many people who they just love telling you how busy they are.

[0:19:26.4] NJS: Right. I love the quote that busy has become the new answer to how are you, instead of fine. Everyone's just like, "I'm busy. I'm so busy." Again, that busyness is a way to keep us out of connection. It's a way to keep us from interacting with the world. If I'm busy and I'm all up here in my head, then I don't ever settle back down into my body and really connect with the holiday.

It's recognizing what are my busy behaviors. Is it that I'm making a thousand to-do lists? Is it that I'm driving from place to place? Is it that I'm honking at other drivers, because I'm so upset, because they're getting in my way to my next thing? Then be like, "Okay, I need to slow down. I need to take a little break here."

I have these – I am not a fan, even though I just saw you guys did with Dan Harris. I love his 10% Happier book, but I can't do meditation and I struggle with that. What I do are just 30-second, I call them mindfulness hacks where you just can get into your body for 10 seconds, whether that's to bend over and touch your toes, or stretch your hands up to the sky, or just wiggle around. Anything that is like, "Oh, yeah. I'm in my body." That cuts off that busyness, busyness, busyness brain that keeps us so hopped up.

[0:20:52.8] PF: You just cut that circuit for a minute.

[0:20:54.7] NJS: Yes. Yeah.

[0:20:56.6] PF: Sure. I love that idea. You also, you have a newsletter. We're going to have a link to it on the website, but you have a newsletter to help people get through this holiday time. Can you tell me a little bit about what they get when they sign up for this newsletter?

[0:21:09.1] NJS: Yeah. It's called Live Happier Through the Holidays and it's a note that pops into your inbox every morning. It's just a little tidbit on how to do the holidays differently. Just a reminder from me and I call it a reminder from your biggest fan who I think is the voice of wisdom inside of us who can just remind you how to slow down, how to take a breath how to stay in your own lane so you're not getting involved in everyone else's business around the holidays. Just little tidbits like that. It runs through the end of the year and it's just a great way to stay connected to yourself throughout the holidays.

[0:21:48.2] PF: That's excellent, because I think we need that help right now.

[0:21:50.9] NJS: Yes, definitely.

[0:21:52.5] PF: Well terrific. Nancy, you are such a delight to talk to. This is a perfect topic for us to be talking about right now. I thank you for coming on and sharing your wisdom with us.

[0:22:03.6] NJS: Thanks. Thanks for having me. It was a lovely conversation.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

[0:22:10.3] PF: That was Nancy Jane Smith, author of *The Happier Approach: Be Kind to Yourself, Feel Happier and still Accomplish Your Goals*. You can learn more about Nancy when you visit our website at livehappynow.com and you'll also find a link to sign up for her free e-mail series Live Happier Through the Holidays, to help you keep your season a little more sane.

As always, if you liked what you heard here today and want to hear more, go to Apple podcast 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 today, 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]