

EPISODE 194

[INTRODUCTION]

[0:00:02.7] PF: Welcome to episode 194 of Live Happy Now. This is your host, Paula Felps, thanking you for joining us today. If you've ever wondered what happened to your playful side, we have a great topic for you today.

Anthony DeBenedet is author of the book *Playful Intelligence: The Power of Living Lightly in a Serious World*. As a medical doctor and behavioral science enthusiast, Anthony has looked at how living a more playful life can help us counteract some of the seriousness of our day-to-day living. Live Happy editor, Chris Libby, talked with Anthony about how playfulness can improve our lives and how you can find more time for it in your own life.

[INTERVIEW]

[0:00:41.9] CL: How are you today, sir?

[0:00:43.8] AD: I'm doing well. Thanks for having me, Chris.

[0:00:45.5] CL: Great. Can you explain what playful intelligence is and what brought you to this idea of playful intelligence?

[0:00:52.8] AD: For sure. I first became interested in the study of play when I was a brand-new dad about 10 years ago and I was desperately trying to figure out how to connect with my daughter, Ava. That turned into a book called *The Art of Roughhousing*, which champions parent-child physical play. Then more recently, probably within the past five years, my life started colliding with what I call Barrie's crossroad and I'll explain that in one second. It's basically a crossroad that I think we all come to at some point in adulthood. I describe it as when you find yourself doing everything you can to endure adulthood while wondering whether you're actually enjoying it.

I came to Barrie's crossroad again a few years back and my life was just blurring into this frazzled mosaic of busyness and exhaustion and intensity and seriousness that swirled around

my career, my family life, relationships, everything that comes with adulthood. As I look back, I think I was really in hindsight on the verge of burnout, both professional burnout and personal burnout. I was probably 70% there.

I started thinking about play again in response to that. What I was noticing was that the playful parts of my own personality in adulthood were being slowly wiped away, by kind of a daily grind of intensity and seriousness that we experience in adult life. Interesting, so why do I call it *Barrie's crossroad*? Well, in the early 1900s when the similar adulthood feelings were taking over James Barrie, he decided to write a play. We all know the play, it's Peter Pan who about a boy who never wanted to grow up. That was really Barrie's attempt to hold on to his childhood wisdom that he thought was fast escaping him just amid the craziness that was around him.

I didn't write a once in a millennium play, but I attempted to look into what actually, or how actually does playfulness work in adult life to help us along. The result of that was *Playful Intelligence*. When I think of playful intelligence, I think of it as just more of an awareness of how various playful behaviors are often working behind the scenes to bring us joy, to get us through our days, to sprinkle some happiness, honestly around our lives and the people who we're interacting with. That's how it all started.

[0:03:43.5] CL: That's so great. When you think about children and their daily lives, I'd say most of it is pretty much playing. Everything they do is playing. We lose this as we grow older. How can keeping this sense of playfulness benefit our health or mental and physical health?

[0:04:00.7] AD: Yeah, you're exactly right, in the sense that we – I think that as adults, we lose the playful aspect of play a lot of times. I mean, I can think of a million times, or not a million times. I can think a lot of times when I've gone on vacation or I've gone to a game, or I've gone out and what am I doing? I'm thinking about my next day. I'm not truly playing, or I'm being too competitive if I'm playing a game. I'm not truly enjoying it from a playful standpoint.

What I found was in my research and it was all qualitative. I didn't do a quantitative analysis of this, but a lot of interviews. Some a lot of my patients in fact, and then observations is that those who live a little more on the playful side of the coin, and that doesn't mean goofing off all the time, or taking everything not seriously, because it's really – it's about taking yourself a little less seriously. Not necessarily taking life less seriously. What I found was is that these – it really, if

you break it down, you really look into these playful qualities that I talk about in the book. There were five that popped up in – or common threads in all the interviews I was doing.

Those five are imagination, sociability, humor, spontaneity and wonder. What's interesting is that there isn't a lot of research on adult playfulness proper. There's a ton of research like you alluded to children playing and the benefits of playfulness and play in child development. There's very little research in adult development. I think that when it started to come alive for me is that when you actually look and say, "Well, what is playfulness?" Well, playfulness is a set of behaviors. That's the root – that's a root of playfulness. There are these various behaviors.

Then when you say, "Well, what are the ones that really seem to help us from a mental and physical health standpoint?" These were the five that really stood out to me. I'll give you one example – We can talk a lot about – I'll give one example to humor, because a lot of people think of when they think it's playfulness, they think of humor.

What's interesting about humor is that humor probably has the most research on it about physical health. The sciences overall I would call soft, but suggestive. Meaning that there is some science that shows engaging in humor in your life, whatever that looks like, might help you cardiovascularly, or might help your immune system.

Really where the science I think gets more hard and more robust is when you talk about mental health with humor, because what's interesting is that as kids, we – this is another big theme in the book is that the playful behaviors as kids work a lot differently than they do now as we're adults. Humor when we're kid is all about just fun, right? It's about laughing and giggling with your pal and running around your neighborhood. Just really just a lot of fun.

When we become adults, humor – there's still some fun aspect to humor, but it becomes much more about connection with people in front of us, our partners, our friends, our co-workers, and then also resilience. When we are going through a really, really hard time in our life, when we're going through a desert, that's when humor and that's the playful intelligence part to humor is that it's a huge connecting force for us in our relationships, which helps our mental health. Of course, we know that we have to exist. Even the greatest introvert has to exist in some contact with other people. We can't exist in isolation.

I've seen it countless times in my clinical practice, where there is intense emotion; the highest you can get when you're talking around a bedside that a family member is dying. All of a sudden, there's a little – a memory, or some little thing that lightens the mood and connects people and helps you get through that. I mean, I think that humor helps us in that sense.

What we're seeing is that humor gives you a psychological distance from the situation. It's not as if you are physically distant from the situation, but you're able to step away from it psychologically and say, "Oh, my gosh. Let's try to make the best of this, honest." That's where it comes down to.

[0:08:43.6] CL: Yeah. It seems like incivility and hostility are – they're on the upward trend lately in America. I mean, according to the world happiness report, America is slipping in happiness. How can playfulness help us become happier and nicer people?

[0:09:03.0] AD: Yeah. I think, one as I've seen that report and it's hard to read, it's hard to see. I think it translates not only just to adults, but also to children. It's hard to be a kid these days. I think that what playfulness does is it's not a – again, it's not a mechanism or framework and playful intelligence is a framework to think about to escape stress. It is rather a framework to help manage it and help think about it a little bit differently.

I'll give you an example with one of the other playful qualities that's talked about in the book, a lot in that spontaneity. Spontaneity is one of the playful behaviors that gets a lot of knocking or cutting down in our adult lives, especially when our intensity and our seriousness and our stress levels and our uncertainty, like we're in a time right now is ratcheting up. The reason for that is that when that stuff happens in our lives, we naturally as humans tighten. We tighten down our schedules. We become more rigid. When something doesn't go our way when we're real rigid, we become irritable.

What spontaneity does and what's really cool is that if you are deliberately trying to maybe add a little bit of spontaneity into your day; for example, you're taking a different route home from work. Okay, very basic level of spontaneity there. You just don't take your same commute. Or another basic level spontaneity, you sit at a different chair at dinner than you normally do. Most families, they sit in the same chairs all the time. For one, you're trying to get more spontaneity in your life, so you do that.

What's interesting in the research is that when you're doing that, you are actually becoming more mentally flexible and agile in your thinking. That is a critical skill, because you can think about all the times in our days as adults where a day totally falls apart, or something in our life turns out totally differently than we expected it to turn out; a job, a relationship, whatever it may be.

If we're exercising our mental flexibility in that sense or our psychological flexibility is the phrase I use in the book, we're more nimble and we're more able to ride those times, ride through those times. I think in a time like this when there's a lot of yelling, there's a lot of shouting, to be able to flexibly look at situations from different angles, problems from different angles, because that's really what spontaneity is doing inside your mind when something doesn't go your way, you're ricocheting in a different direction in your mind, if you can do that. It takes practice. I think that that's one example of how you can find some joy and happiness in these crazy times.

[0:12:20.9] CL: I'm really glad you brought up spontaneity, because in the book you talk about how this also, spontaneity can lead to generosity. Can you talk a little bit about that?

[0:12:31.3] AD: Yes. That was one thing I was not expecting when I was working on the book. I'm interviewing these folks and I'm hearing about their generous lives, how they live – that doesn't necessarily mean financial generosity. It can mean time, volunteering, or just kindness. The connection there and this was some interesting research out of Yale, David Rand did it and I give him full credit. I mean, he was just fascinating. He's still doing this stuff.

He's basically looking at decision-making and the notion of when we make a decision, are we making it fast or slow? Pretty basic construct. How long are we actually thinking about that decision? If we think about the decision quickly or not so quickly, does that have any effect on what the actual decision is? Mainly, does it make us more cooperative as a human species and does it make us more generous?

What's interesting is that when you make a little faster decision, or a little more spontaneous decision, you're more likely to live a more generous life. This makes sense if you just stay common sense where you just think back and say, "Well, when was the last time somebody came to my door asking for a donation? Or when was the last time I saw a homeless person on

the street asking for something?” If you make that decision relatively fast and say, “I’m going to try to help and do something,” you’re likely to make a generous – you’re likely to step forward generously.

When you start thinking about it and you start rationalizing, “Well, this homeless person is going to use this for drugs and alcohol. Or this person here at my doorstep, you know what? This is something that – I’m not even sure that this is legitimate what they’re asking me to do,” you’re more likely to hold back. That’s not to say that you go ahead and give someone \$5,000 walking down the street. Even just living a little bit more generously and that can even be a random act of kindness; it crosses over to that world as well, where you’re paying for somebody’s drive through McDonald’s meal or something like that.

In that research, in terms of living more generously with the route being, “Oh, I’m going to make maybe a little more faster, a little more spontaneous decision here,” has shown to they have good health and physical health, as well as mental health benefits.

[0:14:58.0] CL: I want to switch to this topic, because I love this topic. It’s wonder, and you talk about it in the book a lot. It’s a little different from the other ones, because it’s directly related and correct me if I’m wrong, but it’s directly related to an experience, correct?

[0:15:12.7] AD: That’s correct. Yes. It’s a little different. Right. I love wonder too, and so I ended the book with it. I love it, because I was so not experiencing it. I mean, I was just so jaded and I’m just – I was walking around, nothing really brought me to that state. The big takeaway from it is that those who are living, I can go – and were taking themselves a little bit less seriously; they have a lower threshold for experiencing wonder, in the sense that it doesn’t necessarily require this majestic, amazing Grand Canyon, or this amazing musical performance, or athletic performance, or whatever it is to get them to pause. That it can be at something very, very – it can be something small. It can be just watching a child.

The cool thing about wonder is that it’s one of the only behaviors or emotions that urges inaction, rather than action. It urges us to stop really and to slow down. There’s some reasonable evidence and there’s I think we’ll see more in the next decade on this, how that just notion of being able to pause, even if it’s a small moment during your day. We’re talking 30 seconds here. Just to slow you down and decrease inflammation in our bodies; it helps us live in

the present moment, right? Be more trusting and supportive. That inflammation going back to the physical thing and can translate to better cardiovascular health and also decrease risk of cancer.

Now that's a stretch. Obviously, the research isn't there yet. I think it could come. Yeah. I mean, I think that it's – I talk about in the book this notion of wonder rehab, which just about – and I had to put myself through just like when you get a physical injury, you got to rehab the injury, right? I think that as adults, I know I did and a lot of people I knew have to do this thing called wonder rehab, which is this idea of doing things that will help lower your threshold for wonder.

For example, noticing wonder in a child. Doesn't have to be your child, but in any child, because children live with a wonder threshold that is constantly low, right? It's totally constantly low. When you start noticing that, then you will remember, “Oh, yeah. It's important for me to have a little wonder threshold too.”

[0:17:50.9] CL: Dr. Debenedet, you're a doctor, so we can trust your opinion that playfulness is good for our health. Thank you for joining us today. This has been excellent.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

[0:18:04.2] PF: That was Anthony Debenedet, author of the book *Playful Intelligence: The Power of Living Lightly in a Serious World*. You can find out more about Anthony and where to buy his book by visiting us at livehappynow.com. We hope you're already a subscriber to Live Happy Now, but if you're not, you can find us on the Pandora Podcast Network, Spotify, iHeart Radio and on iTunes and Google Play. Just look for us on your favorite platforms and then hit subscribe so you'll never miss an episode.

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

[END]