



## **EUDAEMONIA** **Happiness, with Dacher Keltner**

January 30, 2019

---

Kim Forrester 0:02

Dacher Keltner is a full professor at the University of California Berkeley, director of the Berkeley Social Interaction Lab, and founder and Faculty Director of the Greater Good Science Center. His research focuses on the biological and evolutionary origins of compassion, or love, beauty, emotional expression, power, social class, and inequality. And Dacher is the co-author of two textbooks, and several books including *Born to Be Good: The Science of a Meaningful Life*, and *The Compassionate Instinct*. Now, it's my great pleasure to be connecting online with Dacher today to talk about what it means to be happy, and to discuss the choices we can each make on a daily basis to live more contented lives. Dacher, it's an absolute pleasure to have you here with us today. A good afternoon to you over there in Berkeley. How are you?

Dacher Keltner 1:01

I'm doing well. How about yourself, Kim?

Kim Forrester 1:03

I'm fabulous. It's morning time here in Singapore, I have my cup of tea and I'm ready to be happy today. Now, do you think that happiness is undervalued or underappreciated in our modern society?

Dacher Keltner 1:16

Well, you know, it really depends on what part of society you're talking about. What I can say, Kim, being part of, you know, the positive psychology, wellness and happiness movements the past 20-25 years is... it's risen in value, there's no doubt about that. Countries care about their happiness, governments are starting to think about it. But you know, it's striking that we see an undervaluing of happiness in places or sectors that really matter, you know, the criminal justice system. Only recently in the United States has our healthcare system really systematically thought about promoting happiness. So, we still have a lot of good work to do.

Kim Forrester 1:57

What makes me ask that question, Dacher, is that there seems to be a lot of focus on how many Twitter followers you have, or, you know, how many minutes you've spent on TV. We seem to be valuing ourselves and others based on these very superficial concepts and factors and happiness and how happy we are doesn't seem to be appearing somewhere in the value system. What do you think about that?

Dacher Keltner 2:21

Yeah, no, definitely when you think about, you know, the online representation of happiness on many different platforms, as you're saying, you know, how many followers do I get? Are they

pressing a little heart on the photo I posted, or a like button, or whatever the case may be. That really short-trips and is a shallow representation of what we know scientifically and culturally brings us happiness, things like service and kindness and gratitude and taking time out to really slow things down. So I agree with the thrust of your question which is your observation that, you know, we're starting to learn in the happiness literature about the deep sources of happiness, and I think it's a open question, how well the online platforms really, kind of, reflect that wisdom.

Kim Forrester 3:12

So do you think that we were better at happiness in the past? Are there eras or generations in the past who understood and valued happiness more than we do now? Or do you think that we are actually evolving into a happier species?

Dacher Keltner 3:28

Wow. So, here's how I'd answer. You know, it's interesting, I don't think since we've been collecting empirical evidence that it shows, you know, like, for example, the United States is getting happier. In fact, some of the data show we're getting more stressed out, and I suspect that's true in Singapore or Australia or other places. But here's how I would answer that question, Kim, and I really like the question because when I teach happiness at UC Berkeley or at the Greater Good Science Center online, you know, we say; look, happiness isn't one thing, it's really 15-20 different practices that range from cultivating positive emotions like gratitude or compassion, training the mind to be calm through mindfulness and other kinds of practices, and then learning how to connect to people really deeply and meaningfully. And so what I would say is, in past historical periods, they probably were better at social connection. They had... They weren't... They didn't have technologies getting in the way, they weren't working 60 hour weeks, 50 hour weeks, they didn't have economic inequality. And so, you know, if you, I think if you were to look at the... in certain hunter-gatherer societies, for example, you might be struck by how much the kids play, how much they wander, how the people seem to be in more face to face time, but they were living shorter lives. So the physical pain really intruded here today we have richer physical lives for the most part, but we've lost certain skills of happiness like social connection, and especially just slowing down and being mindful.

Kim Forrester 5:08

The reason I asked that question, Dacher, is because living here in Southeast Asia we have many developing nations as neighbours, and we can travel from our beautiful affluent lives here in Singapore where many people seem to be quite bitter and unhappy, and go and visit the children of Cambodia, who lead very simple lives in comparison, and yet they seem to exude happiness, and I wonder if materialism has somehow undermined as you were saying, our social connection and those deeper, more intrinsic parts of ourselves that lead toward contentment?

Dacher Keltner 5:44

Yeah, what a wonderful framing, Kim. You know, there's no doubt in when I teach happiness I warn the students of all ages of the toxic thoughts that accompany materialism; sort of unfettered capitalism. Things like 'self interest is the most important focus', they build toxic thoughts like, you will find happiness in consumerism and materialism. All of the empirical evidence suggests when we think about money, when we want to make money, when we buy things, when we are hoping to buy a new whatever, it negatively impacts our happiness. It reduces happiness. And I have just

consistently had the same experience you have, Kim, you know, going to Nepal in 1984, it was one of the poorest countries in the world at the time, and the people felt just wonderfully happy. Going to rural parts of Mexico, where, you know, the sort of material conditions weren't as wealthy as the United States but deeper happiness and that I think should serve as a reminder, not only of the toxic thoughts, but also, you know, what did we lose and what are we missing? We know in the United States 30% of Americans feel really lonely, and they're really missing social connection. So great reminder.

Kim Forrester 7:09

That leads me on to what I think is incredibly important. And that is that I think many of my listeners here would assume that we become happier the more we get out of life, but you actually teach that giving is one of the keys to happiness. Tell me more about that.

Dacher Keltner 7:27

You know, I think this is one of these literatures that shook up not only the Science of Happiness, but, I think, many of our culture... sort of, our culture more broadly. You know, if you ask a person you really trusted who was 80 and you said, you know, and you really, really admire and them in the life that they've lead and you said, 'what brought you happiness?' They're very likely to say things like the people that they worked with, or that they live with, the opportunity to serve in the career or in their volunteer work. They're going to kind of get to this theme of giving rather than getting. And we've known that but what happened scientifically is the following, which is that first came along Elizabeth Dunn, an amazing young researcher at the University of British Columbia, and she found we get happier when we give away money than when we spend it on ourselves. Most Americans believe you get happier by spending money on yourself, but in actuality it's the opposite. We get happier giving away. And then along came this kind-of neuroscience and health science that showed older adults who spend more time helping live longer, and then some of the studies of the brain showing, you know, Kim, when I give something to you a reward circuit in the brain is activated just as if I was eating chocolate or getting a nice, you know, massage or winning money. So giving has its inherent rewards in the brain, and so I think that is leading the field to think about how giving and service are at the core of happiness.

Kim Forrester 9:09

That sounds so incredibly, beautifully simple, Dacher. There's... The industry, the happiness industry, I think has absolutely taken off over the last decade, and people all around the world are trying to chase that elusive sense of happiness. It seems to me that we may have some misconceptions about not only how we gain happiness or create it, but also what happiness is. Do you think that there's a misconception around the actual sensation of happiness and what it is that we're actually searching for, for a fulfilled life?

Dacher Keltner 9:44

You know, I think that's one of the deeper questions that I try to engage my students with and that you're raising is, you know, there's all this happiness madness now of articles and newspapers and magazines and Books and so forth, and I think we really... We have to take a step back and watch out for some of the misconceptions. One I think is that... is this idea that you can find happiness through just kind of maximising your own sense of self, and you and I have talked about that, and

that is really misleading. You can find happiness in money. A lot of Americans believe that, for whatever reason, and that proves to be wrong. Another one is happiness is... and this is complicated... is that if you study it, and if you apply it, you'll get it, and happiness is something you have to kind of build your life around, and then it happens to you, you know, you're suddenly you're walking to work and you pass by a playground and you just become overjoyed watching kids wrestle on the ground or whatever it is, you have to kind of build it into your life and then let it happen. So I think we have to watch out for the various misconceptions of what the state is. And again, a final one, like you said is, what kind of sensation is it? And it's really... it's not just euphoria, it's really subtle; it's a sense of beauty. It's a sense of the warmth in your chest when you give something away, so it's a complicated thing.

Kim Forrester 11:18

That was precisely what I was leading to. I think that, and you touched on it just there in your answer, in that I think people confuse a sense of triumph or a sense of euphoria as happiness. So, can you just elaborate then, Dacher, what does happiness feel like to you?

Dacher Keltner 11:37

Well, what I believe is, you know, there are what we would call multiple dimensions of happiness. And one of the challenges of happiness, and what it feels like to me, Kim, is to think about what are the kind of the 12-15 really deep positive states that you can find, and for me it is looking at nature at a certain time of day and I feel beautiful. For me, it is a nice pat on the back or embrace with a friend or a loved one where you feel the oxytocin surge of connection. For me, it's the chills when I hear beautiful music. For me, it is sort of the activation of the vagus nerve that fills your chest with warmth, when you feel kindness towards others, and you feel connected in common humanity. Another one that's really important for people to think about, and people often ask me, like, what are the three things I should do to get my teenager happy? And one of them... and one of them... I know, good luck!

Kim Forrester 12:45

Wake them up.

Dacher Keltner 12:49

Exactly. So what... but, you know, and I tell them, like, what... where do they feel good, and then, which we've been talking about, another one is just where do you find calmness, you know? Is it in the yoga studio? Is it in sitting with a friend quietly? Is it in looking at nature; calmness? And then, happiness has this... it's more than a feeling obviously, it's also this, kind-of, narrative sense of your life, of like, 'wow, I'm living this life that has these chapters and these characters and dramas, and, do I start to see it moving in this direction that gives me joy?' And, I think if you can find calmness, some delights, and this narrative feeling, you're off to a good start.

Kim Forrester 13:36

Wow, the three things that I picked up from that answer just there. First of all, happiness is obviously about simplicity. Secondly, there is no business in happiness. It seems to be very quiet and

peaceful. And thirdly, it is obviously about who we're being and not what we're doing at any particular point.

Dacher Keltner 13:59

Yeah.

Kim Forrester 13:59

Fabulous. Let's get on to the benefits of pursuing or creating a happy life, Dacher. You talk about the five benefits of happiness, and I just want to chat about each one of them with you right now. The first is a greater life expectancy, you already touched on this. So you're saying that if we can create a happier vibe in our lives then we'll actually live longer?

Dacher Keltner 14:23

Yeah, you know, this was important work by Sonja Lyubomirsky, and a big review of studies, you know, what are the benefits of happiness, and one of them is life expectancy. No matter what stage in your life, if you're feeling more joy, less stress, more calm, you will live longer. And we're starting to understand through other kinds of research the influences of happiness on your immune system, your digestion, your heart, your cardiovascular system, your hormonal levels. So, we're starting to get a picture of why happiness helps us live longer.

Kim Forrester 15:03

And the great thing is you're not only living longer, but you're living a longer, happier life. So you've already touched on the second benefit, which is greater physical health. So happiness actually obviously releases all sorts of wonderful physiological processes that increase our physical health.

Dacher Keltner 15:24

Yeah, you know, and so, one of the hot areas of inquiry right now is that happiness tends to, you know, let's say I practice loving kindness, or I laugh with my friends, or an out in nature and it's really beautiful, or I'm with a loved one, it tends to activate the vagus nerve, which is this large bundle of nerves that connects your brain to your gut in your body, and all of the new science is showing that the vagus nerve is, and we study it and I wrote about it in *Born to be Good*, really helps regulate digestion, it controls... it helps strengthen your immune system, it actually attaches to little cells in your intestines, regulates the inflammation response. So it's just remarkable to me that these things that seem airy and lofty to get happiness, like practising gratitude, actually have very direct influences on a part of your body that is related to physical robustness.

Kim Forrester 16:24

As an aside, there is a growing interest in the gut, it seems to be a second brain in our body, but that's another discussion. The third of the benefits is enhanced social benefits. So we connect with more people, we connect greater with people when we're happy?

Dacher Keltner 16:41

Yeah, you know, I mean, this is just borne out time and time again, and what gets really interesting is, you know, so, you practice gratitude and you feel good and other people feel good, you learn how to handle the conflicts of your marriage through laughter, and play, and touch and your marriage does better. What I'm really struck by, Kim, is and it's almost this magical quality, and there's studies now showing that if I'm feeling really kind or grateful or content, my family or my friends will feel more kind and content and then they will go out, and even though I'm not there, they're likely to make other people feel kind and content. So it really builds up these... it spreads through social networks.

Kim Forrester 17:29

There was a Canadian study around that, wasn't there, Dacher? That if you are happy, you can actually increase the potential for happiness in people you may never meet.

Dacher Keltner 17:40

Yeah, no, it's... I mean, it blows my mind. That it's that powerful.

Kim Forrester 17:45

I also read somewhere that if you smile, people will regard you as more likeable.

Dacher Keltner 17:51

Yeah, you know, I mean, we had this finding in our lab from 2001 that was an important early finding in positive psychology that, you know, the warmth of your smile when you graduated from university predicted how happy your marriage was 30 years later. People were like, 'how could that be?' You know, and part of the reason is when I manifest the signs of happiness, like a nice smile, good tone of voice, nice patterns of touch, easy pattern... way of listening to others, other people trust me, they feel connected, they want to work with me. So it's really important to be thinking about the social manifestation of happiness.

Kim Forrester 18:38

It brings us back to that old adage, you... what you put out is what you bring back to you, and you're saying that's quite literally true in terms of happiness and the way that you express it out into the world. It's fascinating. Enhanced creativity. That is a really interesting benefit of happiness. Tell me about that.

Dacher Keltner 19:00

Well, you know, that one's been around for 40 years, and it starts with Alice Isen, and then it continues with Barbara Fredrickson at the University of North Carolina, and these investigators have found when I feel light hearted, or I feel... I've just laughed at a movie, I'm feeling loving, what happens is the mind doesn't become stupider, but it actually opens up and becomes more associated. So it forms associations with more unusual objects; it has new perspectives on that, what you're looking at in the moment. And the mind, in effect, becomes more open rather than

closed, and that's one of the hallmarks of creativity is that is produced by happiness, as it kind of frees you up, gets different ideas in your mind connecting to one another in really productive ways.

Kim Forrester 20:00

So the important question, Dacher, here is that in order to enjoy these benefits of happiness, are you saying that we have to be happy in every moment of our lives?

Dacher Keltner 20:11

No, you know, I think there are three realms that we need to work on for happiness, you know, and one is the positive stuff we've been talking about; gratitude, or, you know, flow and another one is relationships, which we've been talking about, and then the third is how you handle the tough stuff; the stress, the loss, the trauma, the injustice, that is part of human living. You know, a lot of, you know, most of us will encounter enormous stress, most of us will have a loved one die, teenagers go through enormous amounts of anxiety at certain phases, a lot of us suffer from anxiety or depression, and there, in a way, I think that the power of the happiness literature is really at its greatest, which is you have to learn how to accept this stuff you have to learn how to get perspective you have to learn how to tell stories about the traumas in your life or the ruptures, and those tools help us handle anger and fear and anxiety and being blue, and you have a loved one die; that's all part of living. And that's where happiness often is most important to find.

Kim Forrester 21:33

Wow, so I'm hearing there that it's the point is not to continually feel happy, but perhaps to make sure that we continually reaching for happiness.

Dacher Keltner 21:43

Yeah, absolutely. And, you know, I teach this Aristotle view of happiness or the good life, which is all of the human experiences for the most part, you know, except genocide and torture and so forth, and in sexual violence, a lot of our experiences are just human. It's human to get angry at your spouse, it's human to be fearful of giving an important talk, those are part of the human spectrum. And we do better reaching for happiness, if we have wisdom and acceptance towards those human experiences.

Kim Forrester 22:20

Now, I'm lucky enough to have been born in New Zealand, and I say lucky because until quite recently, New Zealand was always topping, you know, in the top of the happiness spectrum in terms of nations. I also spent a year in Denmark as an exchange student, so I've actually... I've known happiness on a social level in my life, and you say that our individual happiness, if we can expand that into a happy society, it actually has great benefits for our nation as well. Can you tell me about that?

Dacher Keltner 22:55

Yeah, you know, the United States by contrast, is doing okay in terms of happiness, but it's not as happy as New Zealand or Denmark or, some studies, Costa Rica. And what I think is really exciting

is people care a lot about happiness and health, and in particular the health and happiness of their kids, and we should be looking at the health of our country, or our neighbourhood in terms of how much happiness it brings to the people we care about and our fellow citizens, and when we find their parts of our society that undermine our happiness, that should be an important part of our conversation, as we build societies, as you say, so, you know, in the United States we're learning, for example, well, what we know is happier countries they have a better life expectancy, they have less prejudice, they have a quality of life in terms of fellow citizens trusting each other that we would all really enjoy, and complementing that is studies showing unequal countries with a lot of economic inequality tend to be less happy. Countries where there's a lot of effects of climate change tend to be less happy. So I think that this question you're posing of like, how do we take this science and build happier countries, in light of the benefits we've talked about is really topical today. Another really important one, you know, we know the amount of green space, which New Zealand has enormous amounts of, makes people happy. And so we should be promoting green space, so it's a really important question for all of us to be thinking about.

Kim Forrester 24:41

The first thing that came to mind there is, as a people pleaser and a rescuer myself, is I think it's beautiful for us to enable and encourage happiness in others, however we must be aware of those misconceptions that we were speaking of earlier, because giving your children everything they ask for in life is not necessarily going to make them happy. Rescuing your uncle or cousin who is constantly in drama is not necessarily going to make the world happier if you become unhappy doing so, do you think that's important to sort of point out there?

Dacher Keltner 25:18

I've had the privilege of being in conversation with the Dalai Lama a couple of times, who, and he talks a lot to scientists, and in Tibetan Buddhism they had this idea of tough compassion, right, that you want to practice kindness, like your example suggest, in ways that are good for the ultimate welfare, not only that person you're helping like your child who's throwing a temper tantrum or a struggling relative, but also for yourself and also for the people around you. Right? You should be thinking about this precious resources of your kindness and making sure it brings about the greater good, and so they have very clear ideas about how we can be misled by compassion by being too kind to the wrong people and not being tough enough. So, point well taken.

Kim Forrester 26:09

Now, Dacher, I want to get very in depth and personal with you here. You're the founder of the Greater Good Science Center, and you've dedicated nearly 20 years to researching and amplifying these concepts of goodness such as happiness. How has the academic pursuit of happiness enhanced your personal experience of life?

Dacher Keltner 26:32

Oh man, you know, it... Kim, it has at every step of the way since I got into this changed my life, you know, and I'm actually, you know, to be personal, and, you know, there's a lot of anxiety that runs in my family. You know, I've had periods of what you would call clinical anxiety and I... you know, for my own first hand experience the ideas and the science we've been talking about have really opened up the opportunities for happiness. So, you know, when I learned, for example, in the



happiness literature, how powerful just the attachments you form within small families and the people you love are to well being that became this central insight that 'Wow, so much of our happiness... Even though raising kids is hard, and exhausting, and expensive, and all these things that might undermine your happiness, there's a richness there, you can't replace.' It's really in the middle of life now, you know, with certain... the things that people in the middle of life like illnesses and family and friends passing away, it's taught me wisdom I couldn't ever find on my own. So this is an amazing science for people to really keep close to them as they move through life.

Kim Forrester 28:02

Thank you, that was really powerful, Dacher. I've got one final question for you, its a question I ask all of my guests; can you suggest a morning reminder, so a daily practice or a mantra or an affirmation perhaps, that my listeners can use every day to help them create more happiness in their lives?

Dacher Keltner 28:23

Well, I would, I would suggest two things. One is when you wake up, and then the next is some part of your day. The first thing, you know, and it's funny, you know, Kim, I didn't study gratitude and appreciation, I didn't used to teach it a long time ago; the Science of Happiness 15-20 years ago, but there's so much evidence on just the power of getting into a calm state, with a little bit of breathing and mindfulness, and then directing your mind to something you appreciate or feel grateful for this past week in somebody else's life, right? So if you raise children, you may think about what you're grateful for in their lives, and then also kind of this deep gratitude of what are the things in your longer life that have been sacred, that really have given you this opportunity to think about happiness. So that's one, is really just to stay close to thinking about gratitude. And then the other is, I... you know, I really encourage your listeners to find a place where they find beauty and awe, a regular walk, where they can go and look at a tree that gives them a little bit of beauty and awe, or find a part of a city, or find a park, that is just the act of beauty and awe and building it into a ritualised walk has a lot of sacred power to it. So, I would think about that too.

Kim Forrester 30:01

That's great. Because it seems to me there that what you're saying is there are two ways there that we can create or find or choose happiness is not about allowing it to come to us, but actually finding it where it already exists in our lives. Now, Dacher, you are a co-instructor of a fabulous eight week online course called The Science of Happiness. I'm sure that many of our listeners right now are thinking, 'How can I learn to be happier?' Where can they find more about this online course that you offer?

Dacher Keltner 30:32

Yeah, so the online course the Science of Happiness, and now we have one for work is at edX. And edX is a free platform where you can sign up for classes, and we've had tens if not hundreds or thousands of people take the class, and thank you for your kind words. It's really... and we have data showing when you take the class you get happier, just as I get happier when I get to teach it. And then the other thing that I would encourage your listeners to consider is going to Greater Good in Action; [ggia.berkeley.edu](http://ggia.berkeley.edu) , and that's a free platform with a lot of practices to find happiness and you try them out and see what works.

Kim Forrester 31:19

decade that is just fantastic. I must say I'm sitting here now I've completed my morning tea and I'm starting the day with a smile because of that discussion with you. I'm very grateful to you. Thank you very much Dacher Keltner from the Greater Good Science Center. It's been a pleasure.

Dacher Keltner 31:34

Thank you, Kim.

Kim Forrester 31:35

The Dalai Lama said, "If you want others to be happy, practice compassion. If you want to be happy, practice compassion." You've been listening to the Eudaemonia podcast. If you'd like to learn more about how to live a truly flourishing life, then please subscribe and check out [eudaemoniapod.com](http://eudaemoniapod.com) for more inspiring episodes. I'm Kim Forrester, 'til next time, be well, be kind to yourself, and choose the simplicity of happiness.