

Ep105 - How small behavioral shifts can help make you happier

MichaelAaron Flicker: [00:00:00] Welcome back to Behavioral Science for Brands, a podcast where we bridge the gap between academics and practical marketing. Every week we sit down and go deep behind the science that powers great marketing today. I'm MichaelAaron Flicker.

Richard Shotton: And I'm Richard Shotton.

MichaelAaron Flicker: And today we're having a little fun, and Richard and I are taking you on a slight detour focusing on the world of happiness.

Let's get into it. So Richard, you and I have a lot of worldly interests that before the show and after the show fill a lot of time. And I think something that connects us with our listeners, connects us with the people we work with is this sense of let. Being interested in self-improvement, being interested how we can learn from different parts of the world and make ourselves better, of course, in brand marketing, make our brands better, make our co, our clients [00:01:00] and our companies better.

And so when we were thinking about today's episode, we said, what if we took a little detour and indulgence? Fear not. Dear listeners, we're going to go through some academic studies and we're going to do what everyone loves, which is really break down a topic using behavioral science, but we thought we're passionate about happiness.

We're passionate about thinking about how we control our own happiness and how we think about. Getting fulfillment out of our lives. And so we said, what if we made an episode on it?

Richard Shotton: Yeah. I think it's a, I think it's a great topic. You know, there's ways of applying behavioral science to commercial problems, but there's plenty of implications for our own personal lives.

MichaelAaron Flicker: And happiness is no small industry friends. A little bit of research, [00:02:00] 15,000. Self-help books are published each year in the United States. The global personal development market includes happiness books, but also other services and coaching \$48 billion a year projected to grow to 67 billion by 2030.

So there's something really universal about the desire for self-improvement, for happiness. And so we thought, you know, what an interesting topic to dive into here.

Richard Shotton: Yeah, if you look at the Spotify Top 10 podcast last year, Mel Robbins did a CEO, modern Wisdom Homan. You know, they, they, a lot of their topics are about happiness, self-improvement.

So I think this angle of taking behavioral science experiments and applying to this topic should be, should have some, some interest to lots of people.

MichaelAaron Flicker: And for us, the same way we [00:03:00] approach understanding better marketing, we thought we could take here, which is there are things people would report, increased their happiness, and then there's what actual behavior drives increased happiness and that that tension between self-reported.

What we see is actually affecting our, our belief behavior, and our happiness. In this instance, there's sometimes a dissonance and that's kind of like the fodder for good, for good conversation. So I thought I might start by asking you feelings of happiness. Have a lot of conceptions, but are there any misconceptions about happiness that we thought we might bring to everyone?

Richard Shotton: Yeah, I think one of the, the biggest is people often think to themselves, look, if I just get the bigger house, the fancier car, the massive job promotion, if I just get a salary of hundreds of thousands of [00:04:00] dollars, I'll be happy. And that is a bit of a misconception and we'll come back to why it's only a bit, because there's an idea called the hedonic treadmill and it's quite a captivating image.

What it essentially suggests is that people acclimatize a habituate to new products or, or improvements in their life. So there's a very famous psychologist, Philip Brickman. And he interviewed big lottery winners people that had been in really serious car accidents, yet they'd lost use of their, their limbs, for example.

And what he found was when these events happen, yes, their happiness levels decouple. You win a lottery, you are very, very happy. You have a massive car accident. You are very unhappy. The interesting bit he found is that over time these two groups, their happiness, pretty much, not completely, but pretty much [00:05:00] trended back to where it was beforehand and people acclimatized the things that happened to them.

Now, in many ways, this is an absolute blessing. It means that we can put up with really unfortunate events. But it's also a, a curse of humanity that these big financial improvements or changing to our material, well billing be, they have an improvement for a short while. And so people kind of guess that that's gonna happen.

But people often underestimate the fact that over time, that boost disappears.

MichaelAaron Flicker: I read a fascinating article in The Economist maybe two or three years ago. I could try to find it and put it in the show notes that said, this adaptation to whatever your new wealth level is, is actually pretty good for civilization overall because you start to eat healthier food or fancier food, and then that becomes the norm.

You start bringing your [00:06:00] kids to a better school system. You make more money, you bring them to this new level, and then that becomes the norm. So in that way, it helps civilizations level up. But that's a very different argument than, does that drive more happiness for you? You know? So it's an interesting tension there between the human's natural ability to, to make the new normal and then getting deriving happiness from it.

Richard Shotton: Yeah, a a absolutely. And, you know, slight silly example, but you know, most people who are listening woke up this morning nice centrally heated house electric lights, you know, most people didn't give. Thanks for that. It is completely. Just part of the norm. Whereas if someone had time traveled from the 16th century, they would be utterly amazed by the fact you've got electricity, by the fact you've got central heating now that, that type of benefit over time, just people acclimatized to and as you say, from a.

Societal point of view. There's the upside of we strive [00:07:00] for more, we strive for better. We keep on wanting more, but from the individual view, it can lead to unhappiness. Now, what you might wanna take from this is don't fool yourself the, you just need the next big material thing and then you'll be happy.

And unfortunately, that's not. How it works. So you might want to think, let's not push ourselves too hard to stretch ourselves, that giant house or that giant car, because you'll get a small blip of happiness, but after time, it will have come back to your baseline.

MichaelAaron Flicker: I wanna come back to that point in a second, but it, it's reminding me Arthur Brooks has written a number of great books from Strength to Strength is one of his most popular.

He's a Harvard professor of happiness. He studies happiness and he says, happiness is all of your needs. Divided by all of your wants. And so he says it's an [00:08:00] equation actually. And the more that you have in the denominator, the more wants you have. It doesn't matter how much you have, maybe it means all of your, that you have divided by all of your wants.

I got it backwards. It's all of your has, okay. Yeah. Divided by all your wants. And the point is the more that you want. The less your happiness will be, the larger the denominator, the larger the, the less happy you'll be because you always want more. And it didn't make that connection until we're having this conversation.

That's a mathematical formula of the hedonic treadmill, isn't it?

Richard Shotton: Yeah. Well, the, the, what I think's really striking from that is the, what you have is finite, even. To an Elon Musk, it's finite. There are things that you can't afford, unfortunately, once can be infinite. So, you know, once you start thinking of it as an equation like that, you realize it's insane to try and generate happiness by working harder to fulfill you know, get more and more products because your once will just keep on, keep on growing.

So, so I think it is, yeah, interesting [00:09:00] to start, think of it in, in that manner.

MichaelAaron Flicker: What strikes me about this is that. We might adapt to some things faster than others when it comes to happiness like you and you were giving those examples that struck me.

Richard Shotton: Y yeah, so there's definitely a, a bit of research on this.

So it tends to be that people habituate to income, increases to to material goods. What they don't habituate to as quickly, and we can go into this in more detail, are experiences, you know, going out to an amazing meal with your wife taking the kids to a baseball game. So that's something that doesn't habituate as quickly.

And the other part is altruism helping other people. You know, we seem to generate happiness from that and it, we don't habituate it as quickly.

MichaelAaron Flicker: So just to drive home this point, we're saying things that were more quickly to habituate, to are, like, once you get that, raise the benefit of that [00:10:00] incremental income.

Is, is it we are quicker to habituate, to once we have a new life event, we're quicker and things were less quick to habituate to it. Things like hobbies and helping others. Am I understanding?

Richard Shotton: Yeah, exactly. Exactly. And people can take this insight, I think, and apply it to themselves. So there are certain ways where you can.

Stop this process of habitation getting used to material goods. So there's an amazing study that we covered in hacking the human Mind, and we looked at it in the Starbucks chapter and it's run by Leaf Nelson, who's at NYU back in 2008. Very simple study. He gets this massage chair and it's very pleasant to sit in the massage chair.

People enjoy it. And for half of the participants, they have a three minute. 180 second uninterrupted burst of massage. [00:11:00] And then they rate how happy they are on a nine point scale and the average score is 6.05. Other half of the participants exactly the same massage chair. Total time is three minutes, but there's a little bit of a difference.

People sit in the chair for 80 seconds. They then get out of the chair, it's turned off for 20 seconds, and then they get back in the chair for 80 seconds. So time on massage chair is 20 seconds less. Yes, you've got this break in the middle. Now, when those people are questioned as to how happy they are, you see something slightly strange, even though they experience less of the pleasurable event.

They rate their happiness or enjoyment of the chair on a scale of zero to nine, they rate themselves at 7.05. So first group, 6.05, second group 7.05, that is a 17% improvement.

MichaelAaron Flicker: Correct?

Richard Shotton: If people had a break in enjoyable experience. [00:12:00] So the argument here is, let's say. Okay. Speaking for personal experience, one of the things I love is, you know, morning popping out and getting a, a fancy coffee.

I think the argument here would be don't do it every day. If you, if it becomes a daily tree or a twice a day tree, over time it will become a, a quite nice event rather than that special tree. How can you break up some of these enjoyable moments that you have? Because if you do it, you break the.

Habitation, your expectations reset and you can enjoy this thing fresh again.

MichaelAaron Flicker: It's fascinating. We're talking about personal happiness, that's our topic today, but can't help but think about where we've learned this in products and in businesses. We talked about limited time offers. You know, you, you mentioned the book.

You know, we talk about pumpkin spice latte being a limited time offer, and by breaking it. [00:13:00] By saying you can no longer have it, it drives up interest, intriguing desire, right after McRib sandwiches from McDonald's, another famous example, but like where you don't allow that that habituation to continue.

We know that it's got positive effect on brand markets.

Richard Shotton: Yeah. And, and it's not. A tactic that is used by businesses as much as it should be, because the problem is too many businesses prioritize short-term income boost over long-term sustained income streams. Now, Starbucks would've been under immense pressure once they knew pumpkin spice latte was selling so well to extend and extend and extend the selling period.

You know, a naive marketer might have started selling it all year round, but if they'd done that, they would've. Killed the golden goose because over time people would've become bored of it. What's so good is it's only on sale for a few [00:14:00] months. The break that 10 months off allows people's excitement and expectations to reset, and then once they try their first pumpkin spice of the latte of the year, they're, they're excited again.

It tastes brilliant. So sacrificing short-term profit for long-term income could be applied far more often.

MichaelAaron Flicker: Bringing it back to personal happiness, which we, which, which is where the example that we have here from Nelson starts. It strikes me the study shows if you have a actual break in the action, you take 20 seconds away.

We know that it's gonna, it, it resulted in this study, a 17% lift in enjoyment. I wonder how much you can use the imagination or your mind to remind you about how special something is. So I know in my life I felt. [00:15:00] Like I have, I remind myself how uniquely lucky I am to have this, you know, material

go to this thing and I, and when it, you don't allow yourself to assume it's the normal.

That's very helpful. And I, I, you've heard people say they get so much out of volunteering in. Homeless shelters or in soup kitchens. 'cause they, not only are they doing good for others, but it does remind them of how lucky they are to be in their situation. And there's something here about being aware even if you don't break their situation, I don't know if it if that raises anything for you.

Well,

Richard Shotton: often think psychologists identify an insight about human nature and then there are many different ways of applying it. Now, the literal interpretation of it. Experiment is if you are having a very enjoyable experience, counterintuitively, stop it halfway through, have a [00:16:00] break, and when you come back it'll be even more pleasurable.

I think that is the very narrow minded, literal application, but I think your argument makes absolute sense that if you have a. Constant benefit, reminding yourself, you know, having this kind of mental interlude as it were, reminding yourself that it, it's, it's not a guaranteed thing, that it's not there for everyone.

I think that could be a a, a kind of a similar, similar approach. You know, the experimental evidence that I've seen doesn't necessarily prove it, but I think that, that sounds I think very sensible.

MichaelAaron Flicker: To me, so much of happiness is about putting things in context, and what this, what this experimentation does is it really talks about how you just change the context ever so slightly and your enjoyment goes up.

And so being aware of the context of how you're describing your life, or [00:17:00] how you're describing that moment, if you put that in context as you did earlier. If we were a 16th century time traveler, we couldn't imagine the luxuries of heated homes and shelters with electricity. Like it, the context makes a huge difference in how grateful you feel and how much happiness you derive.

Richard Shotton: Yeah, absolutely. Absolutely. But, but there are other tactics as well. There's a whole body of research into how people spend their money as well. So one of the most repeated findings is people tend to get a bigger boost to their happiness. If they spend money on experiences like a, a weekend trip, a meal a sports event, they tend to get a bigger boost.

Of happiness per dollar spent than the same amount of cash spent on a material. Good. So [00:18:00] there's a, a psychologist at Cornell called Thomas Gilovich back in 2010, does a very, very simple study, recruits a big group of people and he asked them to think back to the last time they spent a hundred dollars.

And sometimes he specifies to people. What was the last time you spent a hundred dollars on a material purchase?

MichaelAaron Flicker: Mm-hmm.

Richard Shotton: Other people, he says, what was the last time you spent a hundred dollars on a, an experience? And then he asked them to rate how happy those purchases. And what he finds is even though it was the same amount of cash spent, people who'd spent the money on an experience, they rated the boost 13% greater in terms of happiness than those who'd spent it on the, on the material item.

And that seems to link back to some of this idea of habituation. It's much easier to habituate to material products than it is an experience. An experience. The memory lingers forever. It's got a kind of a [00:19:00] uniqueness, a lack of comparability.

MichaelAaron Flicker: It's a, it's a lovely example of, of, of how in a study you could see like this or that, you know, a hundred dollars, either it was a material or a material purchase or a experience purchase.

I went looking to, to see like how have consumers trends have changed a MasterCard travel industry report. Between 2019 and 2023 showed that us spending on experiences have surged 65% compared to only a 12% increase on spending on goods. So we've got this really great experiment that shows happiness is actually improved and we see.

Real meaningful changes in spending over the last seven, eight years in how people actually behave. So they, they, they pair together to really draw this picture. Experiences [00:20:00] are up, you know, the Yeah. The, the benefit of those are meaningful.

Richard Shotton: Yeah. The evidence would suggest that is a, that's in the kind of positive side of the ledger.

So people might wanna think to themselves, well, you know, what, what, what's my spending pattern? Like, you know, do I predominantly spend on. Material

goods. If you do well, maybe jump on the trend, maybe learn from Mavic experiment and try and adjust that. Spend where, where? And if it's possible

MichaelAaron Flicker: without returning to my psych, my philosophy, major days in university.

There's something also very, temporary about an experience. You buy a car and you that good, you have that good. It is now part of your routine. You drive that car every day. You go to an experience to drive an F1 sports car, and that [00:21:00] experience you have the happiness of the anticipation up to the experience you have the thrill of the experience, you have the memory of it After.

It's not part of your daily routine. It was an experience that was like almost like a peak. It feels different in the type of exchange you're getting between buying a physical good by, by buying something material and by paying for an experience that. Maybe isn't once in a lifetime, but is a, a, a rare exception that to me they have a different return on happiness.

Richard Shotton: Yeah, absolutely. And I think that, going back to the Brickman study. So there's a suggestion that might be integral to why those experiences do better, because they have a, have, have more of a, a uniqueness because they are limited in the amount of time that they last for the habitation. That Brickman so worried about that, [00:22:00] that doesn't seem, seem to happen.

MichaelAaron Flicker: Fascinating. Okay, so we spent a lot of time talking about, so far improving our own happiness. There's another area about gifting that we thought would be very interesting,

Richard Shotton: although I would argue this is a continuation of the previous studies because there are arguments that despite what people think.

Often you get a better return on your money in terms of happiness generated if you spend it on other people.

MichaelAaron Flicker: There you go.

Richard Shotton: There's a lovely study from Elizabeth Dun. She recruits group people back in 2008 and she randomizes them into two groups. So first group are given a small amount of cash, maybe fi \$5 for some, \$20 for others, and they are told go and spend it on yourself.

And she asked them before this kind of setup how happy they are. [00:23:00] Other group of people, they're given either \$5 or \$20 and they're told you have to spend this on someone else.

Advertisement: Mm-hmm.

Richard Shotton: Now that group. Come back at the end of the day by the first group and they are asked to say how happy they are. And what done finds is there is a bigger increase of happiness amongst the people who are forced to spend it on themselves.

Now, it doesn't really matter whether it's \$5 or \$20, the big difference is did you spend it on yourself or did you spend on other people? And it's the group who spent on other people, they see the biggest boost, their happiness.

MichaelAaron Flicker: What do you think caused that for people? What? Why do you think they got more happiness? Before we talk more about the behavioral science, what, what do you think causes that?

Richard Shotton: I, I, I think there is an element of, you know the culture that we are brought up [00:24:00] in the, the messages that our parents teach us, something deep inside is we know we get, we know it's the right thing to do.

We know we get respect for this and. I think often, you know, we conceive of this as a duty or a, or a a moral necessity, but actually once we fulfill those deep seated beliefs, it makes us happy. We feel, we feel good that we've lived up to these deeply ingrained areas. But the point, the key point is if you stop and ask people so Dun did this, you got a completely different group of people, 109 people, and she asked them, you know.

Look, here's my experiment. Which group do you think will be happiest? Majority, it wasn't a huge majority. It was 63% of people, 63% of people thought spending on themselves would do the bigger booster happiness than spending on others. So this is one of those cases where what we think will affect [00:25:00] ourselves and what actually affects ourselves are very different things.

MichaelAaron Flicker: There's a psychologist, Timothy Wilson, who has this line that you and I have talked about before. Yeah. That we are strangers to ourselves. We'd like to think we have a clear insight into what motivates us and makes us happy, but our introspection is limited. We rely on intuition, cultural narratives, assumptions rather than evidence, and they can be misleading.

So when it comes to happiness, the takeaway isn't always that people are irrational or careless. It's more in this instance that our internal compass isn't as reliable as we think. And that's what this study really does, is it helps shine light on that idea that we actually don't really. Perceive what our perception of what will make us happy is not matched to the truth we see in the former part of done study.[00:26:00]

Richard Shotton: Yeah, absolutely. And the great bit here is. If you think about why we're trying to earn money, it is often a, you know, it's an intermediary goal. You know, people don't want cash itself. They want what cash brings. And the best thing, once our kind of basic human needs of shelter and warmth and food are delivered, what we really want to create is happiness.

MichaelAaron Flicker: Mm-hmm.

Richard Shotton: So what Dunn's saying is, even if you can't change your income. Well, you can still improve what really matters, which is the outcome you want, which is this boost of happiness by changing how your money's spent. So she argues, you know, you should be looking for opportunities and they don't have to be grandiose.

That's the brilliant thing as well. This isn't, you know, buying other people holidays or cars. It was \$5 or \$20. Yeah, small acts of. Generosity, kindness for other people, for kindness, make us feel, make us feel happier.

MichaelAaron Flicker: You know, it was, it's funny that your mind went there because I was [00:27:00] thinking about like, is there a curve, a small amount of money?

That I can spend on myself or I can give to someone else in the form of a, a lunch day. Otherwise, you know, you pay for someone else's lunch, doesn't matter who you are, you're, you're taken aback by that kindness. And \$20 can do that. \$5 can be you know, the people in line all get a candy bar like that.

The feeling you get by giving that. Feels stark compared to what that \$5 would get you because of the act of give, of the generosity, of giving something to somebody else. And I wonder if that changes. If the number amount is \$5,000, I, I don't know, you know,

Richard Shotton: so it's often hard for academics to persuade the university to give them multiple \$5,000 gifts.

[00:28:00] But what someone, some people have done, and I don't know, I don't think they've done it in this particular field, but when it came to fairness games, like kind of the fairness game sometimes called the ultimatum game, you get two people together. One is the giver, one's the receiver, separate rooms.

They'll never meet. One's given say \$10. That person, the giver is asked, how are you gonna split the money? You can keep whatever you want whatever ratio you want, they then decide. So I might be mean, and I'm in a room somewhere. You never meet me. I decide I'm gonna keep \$9 and I'm gonna give you one.

The psychologist then goes to you and says, look, the other person was given \$10. He's gonna keep nine. You've been offered one. Do you wanna keep it? You can say yes and the split holds, or you can say no, and both of you get nothing.

From a, from a kind of narrow minded economic [00:29:00] perspective, if you are offered anything, if you're offered, you should give one is better

MichaelAaron Flicker: than zero.

Richard Shotton: Yeah, exactly. But that's not what most people do. Most people, if they're offered less than about 30%. They say I'd rather have nothing and I'd rather other person, that means they didn't get anything.

So then that's been this longstanding set of of studies. But what psychologists realize is these are token, these are trivial amounts of money. What happens if it's serious amounts of cash does suddenly people become more economically rational in inverted comm? So what they did is they didn't have. Tens of thousands of pounds they could do on a repeated scale amongst Americans.

So what they did is they went to countries where a hundred dollars was a month's income and they reran the test there. And what they found is still there was an amount, it was a little bit lower, but you know, below 10 or 20% people are still happy to walk away with nothing. Rather than feel like they're being taken advantage of.

So, sorry. That is a long-winded way of saying what someone should do is [00:30:00] take those \$20 sums or maybe push it to 50, go to a market where \$50 is a week's income, and you could test it there and see what that shape of the, the, the response is without breaking the bank too much.

MichaelAaron Flicker: I think it gets to this question, which is related to happiness, which is.

Are humans naturally selfish or are they naturally more cooperative? There's this famous book by Richard Dawkins, the Selfish Gene, and it argues that evolutionarily the selfish genes, the ones that use more calories, the ones that replicated faster, that protected their own replication and survival at the expense of other genes were the genes that won.

And so I was reading, thinking about today's episode and I was like, is that the answer? Is, is, is that it? And then I found a whole series of [00:31:00] studies the most compelling of which was Felix Warnock's 2006 work, where he compared babies in chimpanzees. And here's the argument. Yeah, you got 14 month old babies that will pick up and hand you something that you actually dropped.

Without any praise or recognition, or they're willing to they're willing to inform others of things that will benefit them even if the toddler doesn't get anything in comparison to chimps. At the same, at the same development milestones, they don't, they don't show any pro-social behavior. They don't show any cooperation.

So I was just arguing with myself. Is there a naturally. You know tilt for humans to be. Prosocial to be more not so selfish, but to wanna collaborate, cooperate is the word I was looking for. Yeah. Are [00:32:00] we a cooperative species? Naturally.

Richard Shotton: And I dunno, Richard, beyond, you know, the, the, the titan, the headline, I dunno his work very well, but I think, I wonder if sometimes with.

A gene being selfish is its key. Aim is to replicate itself, replicate it wants to get to the next generation. However, I don't think that necessarily means that animals and humans behave selfishly because the best way to survive is often to be cooperate generous. So you could have an. Long-term selfishness, but that exhibits itself through generous, seemingly kind behavior.

You know, take up Hunter Gather example. You know, you are going out hunting for deer. There is an element of randomness. You know, sometimes you're lucky, you hit payday, you get a deer, you've got more meat than you can eat, but you could easily go weeks it getting anything. So the best way to survive is when you are successful in your hunt.[00:33:00]

You give me some of that food and then when you fail at the hunt and you're getting hungry, you can turn to me and ask for a re return of that, that favor. So I actually think there's something deep in us about generosity and kindness. It's just that kindness has a benefit to us as well. Now we are talking about the benefit to happiness, but I think hundreds of thousands years ago, it'd been a benefit to survival.

I,

MichaelAaron Flicker: I, I think it's, I think it's a brilliant point and I think we're reinforcing each other's thinking. And the reason it was interesting to me to talk about this because so often we talk about behavioral science and the biases that we. That we uncover having evolutionary roots, you know, like we, that we say, you know, sometimes across cultures, but absolutely across decades.

Our natural biases are very slow to [00:34:00] change. They're very, you know, studies we run in the 1930s, 1940s, 1950s, basically replicate today so many of them. Why, and I think like, it, it, it was interesting to me to think through it probably because of what you are saying here, that over a long stretches of time, these types of behaviors.

Worked out well for the individual. This generosity still has a benefit even, and, and it's not related to evolutionary biology. It's not, it's not. So it's not simple. And I don't think, by the way, Richard Dawkins was arguing that. I just think like, it, it, it's helpful to draw that distinction.

Richard Shotton: Yeah. And, and there's there's a great book by Marcel Mousse called The Gift.

And essentially he argues that every single society has a. A gift giving culture within it. And what's crucial is that a gift brings obligations. So if you are given something, you [00:35:00] feel an obligation to return that favor at late state. And I think that fits with this point of that is the best thing for our society within kind of limited parameters potentially.

But that if you are generous as we go back to the hunter gatherer example with your deer that you've killed. That's brilliant for you if you can expect that favor to be, to be returned. And the example that I always think about when we discuss this idea of reciprocity, and I think this might be a British specific one.

I see. But my parents are in their eighties. I can remember them using the word much obliged. And that would be a sinism, a synonym for Thank you. Now you are literally saying, I have an obligation to you. Much obliged. That was a common kind of way of speaking back in the sixties and seventies.

MichaelAaron Flicker: Fascinating.

So you, the language even revealed the, the, the feeling that, that, that was happening if that's [00:36:00] fallen out of favor now. But that's fascinating that the language kind of shows that.

Richard Shotton: Absolutely, absolutely.

MichaelAaron Flicker: We've prepared one more bias

Richard Shotton: Yes.

MichaelAaron Flicker: In our quest to unpack happiness for our listeners. Would you take us through it?

Richard Shotton: We're finishing with probably the strangest study. So I think it's a slightly strange study. I'll, I'll kind of admit that. But it does have some interesting implications. So this was run by George Lowenstein back in 1987, so it's a nice classic study when he was at Carnegie Mellon and he recruits group of participants and he asks them.

To think about their favorite movie star and imagine they had the opportunity to pay for a kiss for this movie star.

MichaelAaron Flicker: Love it.

Richard Shotton: And then they are asked, how much would you pay for that kiss right this second? How much in 24 hours? How much in three days? How much in one year? How much in 10 years? And what he finds is something [00:37:00] very interesting that when he averages the scores.

He sees this this curve, like an upside down U so people would prefer to have that kiss, not immediately, not now, but to have it in one or three days. That's when the happiness peaks. So it goes up to this peak of three days and then drops down to its very low if it's in 10 years time, and he's arguing is the value of a pleasurable positive experience.

Is not just at the moment, it happens, it's partly the anticipation, like, you know, how long is a kiss gonna last? Five seconds, 30 seconds? Who knows what it's, but, but it's, it's very limited in time. But if you can have three days of expectation and anticipation, then it becomes a far more enjoyable experience.

Now I know kisses of movie stars. That is a frankly bizarre setup. But [00:38:00] I think there's something really interesting. This, you know, if you are gonna spend money on a pleasurable experience, hopefully less crispy than kissing people kissing movie stars, why not put it in the future? And then you get the benefit from that anticipation as well as the actual event.

MichaelAaron Flicker: I, we touched on it earlier. We're driving home this point now that the anticipation of the thing, it, it really enhances your overall happiness, the build. How are we being intentional about that? You know, having a calendar on the wall with the vacation coming and, you know, packing in advance and doing research about the locations, there's ways you can just have a very pleasurable moment.

There's ways you can seek to enhance that [00:39:00] anticipation in positive, healthy, exciting ways, because you're being intentional about your, about your structuring, the happiness that you're deriving from this really exciting movie star kiss, or travel or job promotion, right? Whatever the thing is that you're excited about, there's ways to get more out of it.

And

Richard Shotton: that point you make of intentionality to me, that unites all the things we've talked about. So we've talked about breaks in positive experiences, makes you enjoy them more. Well go out and look for opportunities to do that. We have talked about how experiences for the same amount of money spent tend to make people happier than material goods.

Well. Don't just think, oh, that's a nice study. Go and look for ways of where can I cut back on material spends, what are some nice experiences that I could, I could put that money towards Giving money away makes us happier than spending it on ourselves. And yeah, and, and then the anticipation of it is almost [00:40:00] as important as the thing itself.

So yeah, looking actively, don't just expect to fall in your lap, but look, look actively for those four things, how can you. Increase the volume of these things happening in your life. And it's not about spending more money. I know for

many people there's limitations and, and restrictions. It's not about spending more.

That'd be, I think, a naive request. It's about spending money to maximize the happiness per dollar spent. That's the the key thing between all these studies

MichaelAaron Flicker: and since so much of our audience are professionals, they're, they're in knowledge worker jobs. Your happiness is really much more in your control than the situations around you.

So we're talking about money and spending it on things, but you could say you get the job promotion or you don't. You win the new client or you don't. You have the new assignment from your boss or you don't. All of those are inputs, but deriving [00:41:00] happiness is in much more in your control. These four studies show than.

You might otherwise think without going through this.

Richard Shotton: Yeah, yeah. I, I think that's true. I mean, the, the only one you could add, and that very first study we talked about, the hedonic treadmill is maybe the benefit of knowing about the Brickman study. Is if you can't afford the mansion in the Hamptons mm-hmm.

If you aren't gonna be made the, the CEO maybe remembering that study and thinking, well actually it probably wouldn't have, have boosted my happiness now. I think that will be of some benefit. Knowing something and it changing how you feel can often be different things, but I think it can remove the sting from all the, you know, the, the disappointments that we're all bound to have in life.

MichaelAaron Flicker: My father told me growing up, you know, you shouldn't feel the high highs as high and you shouldn't [00:42:00] feel the low lows as low. And I remember saying to him. That's not the way I wanna live. I'm, you know, as a teenager you wanna feel all the edges, but there's, there, it's a connected theory. It's a con that if there is a baseline and if you remember that, it's in context, so that baseline, then it takes the stings out.

Richard Shotton: Yeah. I, I really like that point that your, your dad's emphasizing about remembering the other half of it as well. If something terrible happens, you will feel horrible. You know, Brickman didn't deny that the people in those horrible car accidents felt. Awful. They were depressed. They were, that's right.

You know, their happiness plummeted off the scale, but his key point is, this too shall pass. You know, it will get better. Now that doesn't remove the sting completely, but I think knowing it's transient, that is a really, really important thing. When times are really bad, there is research that suggests we acclimatize [00:43:00] to even the worst things in life, much more than we expect to.

So knowing that's coming, hopefully gives some sucker.

MichaelAaron Flicker: It's I think it's a, it's a lovely spot to start to come to a close there. Lots to think about. For everyone listening. Richard, is there a trick that you've used to increase your happiness? Is there something like, as you've gone through your career, that look to and say, yeah, this has really helped me be happier than maybe I otherwise would've been?

Richard Shotton: So of all the studies we've talked about, quite a few of them I read about in, in Dunn's book, happy Money we wrote with Michael Norton and the one that I have tried to do more. And of course, you know, we never quite live up to the things that we

MichaelAaron Flicker: yeah

Richard Shotton: Try and do. But the one that I put into practice more is about the pro-social spending.

You know, trying to look for an act or a, a gift that I can do on a more regular basis. Not, not just that altruism book [00:44:00] because, you know, it makes me feel happier. So that's the one I've tried to apply. And yourself. What about, what about you? Is there something that you've, you've, you've done?

MichaelAaron Flicker: I think putting, trying to pick, take the right context frame has always been helpful to me, no matter how successful and good it has been, or no matter how bleak and hearted it has been.

Putting that into some scale is very helpful to me. And for whatever reason we talk about it's been more helpful rather than thinking about what it would've been like 300 years ago, which is like a little bit of a mind game. I just think about how lucky I am. Amongst my own friend group or amongst my own family.

Not that you look for people that are better or worse off than you, but just to think we [00:45:00] all came from the same neighborhood or we all went to the same high school. And in that range, like in context, you know, it gives you a, a,

a lot of appreciation for whatever your situation is. And I, I think just setting the right context frame for me is.

Always made me feel less stress and feel more happy.

Richard Shotton: Fantastic.

MichaelAaron Flicker: Well, thanks everyone for listening to today's episode. If you found it engaging, if you found it interesting, please share it with others that you think would be interested in this topic and to help us reach more folks that would be engaged by our conversation. Please like, comment. Or follow. And those actions really help us work with the algorithm to reach even more new people.

Until next time, I'm MichaelAaron Flicker.

And I'm Richard Shotton.

MichaelAaron Flicker: Thanks so much for listening.[00:46:00]

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