

WorkWell

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The science of happiness with Tal Ben Shahar

Jen Fisher: Hi! WorkWell listeners. I'm really excited to share that my book *Work Better Together* is officially out. Conversations with WorkWell guests and feedback from listeners like you inspired this book. It's all about how to create a more human-centered workplace and as we return to the office for many of us, this book can help you move forward into post pandemic life with strategies and tools to strengthen your relationships and focus on your well-being. It's available now from your favorite book retailer.

When you think about success in your job, what do you think about? Meeting deadlines, outperforming targets, fixing systematic issues? All of these may point to high performance, but they fall short of some of the vital, yet often overlooked ways, we should be measuring success. Like meaning in the work we do, how we positively impact other people in our job and even our own happiness. This is the WorkWell Podcast series live from the World Happiness Summit in Miami, Fla.

Hi, I'm Jen Fisher, Chief Well-being Officer for Deloitte, and I'm so pleased to be here with you today to talk about all things well-being. I'm here with Dr. Tal Ben-Shahar. He is an international renowned teacher and author in the fields of happiness and leadership. He taught two of the most popular courses in Harvard's history, Positive Psychology and the Psychology of Leadership. He also taught Happiness Studies at Columbia University. His books have appeared on bestseller lists around the world and have been translated into more than 30 languages. He is also the co-founder of the Happiness Studies Academy, as well as the creator and instructor of the Certificate and Happiness Studies and the Happier school programs. Tal, welcome to the show!

Dr. Tal Ben-Shahar: Great to be here, thank you!

Jen Fisher: Tal, tell us about yourself, who you are, and then obviously how you became passionate about happiness?

Dr. Tal Ben-Shahar: So, I will actually start with how I became passionate about happiness. It was because of my own unhappiness. I was a student at Harvard studying Computer Science and I found myself in my second year, doing well academically, doing well in athletics, I played squash, was on the team doing quite well socially, and yet being very unhappy and it didn't make sense to me because I looked at my life from the outside and things looked great. I checked the boxes and from the inside, it didn't feel that I remember waking up on very cold Boston morning, going to my academic advisor and telling her that I'm switching majors. She said what? I said well, I am leaving computer science, moving over to philosophy and psychology and she said why? I said because I have two questions. Why am not I

happy and how can I become happier? And these are the questions that have guided me for the past 30 years or so as I have been a student and a teacher of happiness.

Jen Fisher: So, tell us what is happiness and is it something that we are born with? Is it something we can learn?

Dr. Tal Ben-Shahar: So, the answer is yes.

Jen Fisher: I thought that might be the case!

Dr. Tal Ben-Shahar: Well, as you know, as is the answer for the nature nurture question. This is what the research shows on average, 50% of our happiness levels are dependent on genes and very early experiences, in other words, things that we have zero control over, on average 50% which is a lot, 10% on average has to do with external circumstances. The remaining 40% on average choices that we make. Now, I emphasized on average because it varies of course, so external circumstances don't matter that much on average; however, a person who lives in a war zone today, of course their happiness levels are going to be impacted by more than 10% or a person living in dire poverty, of course more than 10%, but on average when basic needs for food, shelter, security are met 10%, then we have 50% genetic or early experiences. However, individuals who were abused when they were very young, of course, their happiness levels are going to be affected or who had an extraordinarily supportive childhood, their happiness is going to be affected by more than 50%. Same with choices and here lies the importance of the science of happiness because what increases the part of the pie that choices are responsible for, what increases that is being mindful of those choices that we have. If I ask you, so tell me do you want to be grateful and appreciative of the good things in your life and the good people in your life? Would you want to take them for granted? I mean, who would say the latter, right? So, it's a rhetorical choice and yet, and yet most people, most of the time do not appreciate the good things in their lives and they take the things for granted until something happens. So, what do we need to do in order to make the right rhetorical choice is we need reminders and the science of happiness is there to remind us to help us create rituals around the important choices in our lives, whether it's appreciation, whether it's regular exercise, whether it's kindness, generosity and whether it's our undivided attention when we are with other people; all these choices contribute to happiness and first and foremost we need to make them.

Jen Fisher: So, tell me is there a definition in science of what happiness is because I think there's probably lots of definitions.

Dr. Tal Ben-Shahar: Yeah, probably around 8 billion of them.

Jen Fisher: When you talk about happiness, what are you talking about?

Dr. Tal Ben-Shahar: Yeah, so what I'm trying to do in my work is integrate and synthesize the thoughts of the great researchers and thinkers from today, from the past, East and West and I've essentially come up with happiness as comprising five elements and the five elements are spiritual well-being, physical well-being, intellectual well-being, relational well-being, and emotional well-being. These five conveniently make up the acronym SPIRE, spiritual, physical, intellectual, relational and emotional, and each of them is an important element of happiness. This does not mean that we need to have it all the time, but it does mean that each one of them is important at some point.

Jen Fisher: So, I guess is happiness a state or is it fleeting? Does it come and go?

Dr. Tal Ben-Shahar: Yeah, no, that's a great question and again it goes back to definition. So there are some people who define happiness as essentially pleasure and then yes, we experience the ups and downs, the vicissitudes of life, and then yes, it comes and goes. My definition of happiness in that includes the five SPIRE elements, but it's something that is more stable and lasting, which also means that part of a happy life is experiencing sadness and frustration and disappointment and in fact, one of the most important pillars of happiness is embracing these painful emotions when they arise. Some of my students, especially the younger ones, would come to me after about a month into the class and they would say, "Tal, we really like this field of happiness studies, the science of well-being or even think of doing more work in this area, but we're a little bit concerned." And I'd ask them how come and they'd say, "because you often talk about the importance of struggles and failure and experiencing hardships. But what if we become so good at the science of happiness that we don't experience those, hardships and difficulties and challenges and I always have the same response." I always say to them, don't worry, life always takes care of us. Again, they are difficult when they happen, of course, but these are essential experiences and inevitable experiences for living a full and fulfilling life.

Jen Fisher: Yeah, my father told me that you can't actually know what happiness is until you know what sadness is? You have to feel both in your life.

Dr. Tal Ben-Shahar: Exactly right, and if you think about it epistemologically meaning through how we gain knowledge. If the whole world was blue, there will be no blue. We know what it is because they're contrasting colors.

Jen Fisher: You teach happiness and you believe, obviously, that it's an important discipline to teach, why is that? How did that come about?

Dr. Tal Ben-Shahar: Professor Martin Seligman, who's the founder of the field of positive psychology when he speaks with parents and teachers, often begins with two questions. The first question is what would you like for your children? Parents, teachers respond well we want them to be happy. We want them to have good relationships, we want them to be resilient, healthy, and so on, kind. Then he says, OK, so this is list number one. He actually writes it down on the board. And then on the other side say OK this is list number two. Question number 2: What do children learn in school? And of course, the three 'Rs' come up reading, writing arithmetic and geography and history. Now there's almost no overlap between the two lists. Now, he doesn't mean that the second list is unimportant. It's very important. However, why are we almost entirely ignoring the first list that is so fundamental, so primal, so basic to what we want is human beings for ourselves and for the people we care about. Now, 30 years ago, if people said well, we're not teaching these things, they would have had a good excuse because we didn't really have a science of well-being. Today, there's no excuse, we know how to teach happiness. We know how to increase levels of well-being. We know how to improve relationships, cultivate resilience, and how people overcome hardships and flourish. Moreover, if schools teach these things, students will not just be happier and physically healthier, but also be better students. So, increasing levels of happiness also improves performance, whether it's school or in the workplace.

Jen Fisher: So, when you first proposed teaching a course on this, what was the response?

Dr. Tal Ben-Shahar: So, I actually didn't know that at the time, but the head of the department came into my class. I did not see her. She was sitting all the way in the back, apparently. Because she heard that a class is being taught on happiness and some people were questioning whether Harvard ought to offer a class like that to so many students. And she sat there for one class and she told her colleagues that she doesn't need to go to another class, that she's very glad this science is being taught in the classroom. So she was convinced by the science and also, of course, by the importance of teaching these ideas at the University.

Jen Fisher: So, let's talk about the modern world and technology. It's all around us. Does it impact our ability to be happy?

Dr. Tal Ben-Shahar: Big time! There was a research done by Jean Twenge, she's from San Diego and her research looked at teenagers and well-being, and what she found and what we know is that in the five years prior to COVID, levels of depression among teenagers has gone up by over 30%. Suicide rates went up by the same margin. During COVID, things actually have been getting worse, so things are not looking good. Now when Jean Twenge and her colleagues looked at war or asked the question why and they combed through the data to better understand the phenomenon of increased depression as well as suicide, they came up with one conclusion and I quote "the ascendance of the smartphone", when kids became quite literally addicted to the screen. Now I'm not against technology. I'm not against screens. I think that I'm not against social media. I think it's wonderful. I mean the fact that people are hearing us now is thanks to technology. I recently met my best friend from when we were 12 years old. Thanks to social media! However, it has become an addiction for so many adults and so many children in its exacting and incredibly high price in terms of mental health. We have to go back to more face-to-face in person, interaction with undivided attention. We need to go back to a more active lifestyle. When I grew up, we used to play outdoors.

Jen Fisher: Go out and play!

Dr. Tal Ben-Shahar: Go out and play. We played soccer until Mom called us for dinner. Whereas today most children, most of the time are sitting down and moving their fingers and that just doesn't cut it when it comes to the amount of exercise that you need.

Jen Fisher: So how do we get there?

Dr. Tal Ben-Shahar: Well, so this is the responsibility of schools that need to educate towards this and it's of course the responsibility of parents who also need to be educated. So, I'm an educator, so my answer is bias. Governments also have a responsibility. Very often what you measure is what gets done, whether you're talking about a small organization or a big organization like a country. So, governments need to measure just as they measure GNP, they need to measure GNH (gross national happiness) and again, I am not saying you shouldn't measure gross national product, of course, economic measures are important, and they are indicative of a culture's or country's well-being. And we should not ignore psychological, less tangible though equally important measures.

Jen Fisher: Is your belief, and I think the science backs this up if we do measure gross national happiness that it will have a positive outcome on GNP as well?

Dr. Tal Ben-Shahar: It will absolutely have a positive outcome because the most important factors today in the workplace are what? They are things like innovation, they are things like teamwork and they are

things like the engagement, and Daniel Goleman calls our age, the age of distraction. So, these are also important for productivity in the workplace, and these are specifically the things that increased levels of well-being will bring about. Now the interesting thing is and what we see in research is that the change doesn't have to be radical. So, even if you increase levels of well-being by 3, 4 or 5%, not a lot, doable, you will see significant increase in creativity, in engagement, in teamwork, in productivity and performance.

Jen Fisher: Let us talk about the workplace because, especially now the Great Resignation, the Great Reevaluation, whatever you want to call it. So much of what is being said about that has to do with people kind of reevaluating the role that well-being and happiness plays in their life and whether or not the workplace is helping or hurting that.

Dr. Tal Ben-Shahar: More and more people as a result of COVID are thinking about the important questions in life, is it meaningful to me or how can I increase my happiness or what has this got to do with my well-being? In asking this question, they naturally look for a different experience at work, so it's no longer enough for them to just make enough money or even a lot of money. They're looking for more. They're looking for a sense of meaning and purpose. So, in a way, what society has experienced is a great awakening. Where they want to embark on a different quest and how does a quest begin? Through questions. And that's what they're asking now.

Jen Fisher: I like that! So how does the workplace respond to that?

Dr. Tal Ben-Shahar: Well, necessity is the mother of invention, right? So, market forces are going to compel managers, leaders to look into these ideas and to look towards the science of happiness for some, not all, but some of the answers. I always used to say before COVID, before the great resignation that leaders, managers need to think about bringing happiness to the workplace, not just because it's a nice thing and you should bring it for your Christmas or end of the year party, but also because creativity, productivity, performance will improve and yet it was not a necessity, not a leadership competency. Today, it's no longer a nice thing to have...

Jen Fisher: They call it soft skills which I don't like because they're actually the hardest skills of all of them.

Dr. Tal Ben-Shahar: It's exactly that, and we also know that these soft skills are better predictors of individual, team and organizational success than the traditional hard skills.

Jen Fisher: So, what do you say to an individual that comes to you that is feeling unhappy or believes that they're unhappy, what should they do with their life, with their work?

Dr. Tal Ben-Shahar: Yeah, so the first thing that I emphasize, and again whether it's to an individual coming to me or to my students, is that the science of happiness is not a panacea, and there are some situations, some individuals who need professional help from psychotherapy or psychiatry, at the same time, even psychotherapists and psychiatrists would benefit a great deal from introducing some of the findings that come from the science of happiness. For example, we know that regular physical exercise has the same effect on our psychological well-being as our most powerful psychiatric medication. In fact, it works in the same way, releasing norepinephrine or toning dopamine, the feel good chemicals in the brain. So that would, I must say, after asking for their name, if I were a therapist, that would be my first question. Are you moving? Are you exercising? And if you're not, how can you start to do so? In

addition, are you spending quality time with people you care about and who care about you? Four hundred or so years ago, Francis Bacon, the British philosopher wrote friendship doubles joy and cuts grief in half. Now, I don't know if it exactly doubles and exactly halves, but it is close to it and we have a lot of research showing that the number one predictor of happiness is quality time you spend with people you care about, and you care about you and the quality time means time with undivided attention, so not being distracted at the same time, being present. Speaking of presence mindfulness meditation, if that's your thing, introduce it into your life if you're not already doing it and it doesn't have to be two hours of sitting meditation a day, it could be three minutes in the morning of centering, deep breathing. It could be maybe a short yoga class twice a week and these interventions can go a long way appreciation, My favorite word in English is the word appreciate because it has two meanings; the first meaning of the word appreciate is to say thank you for something, and that's a nice thing to do, even moral thing. The second meaning of the word appreciate is to grow in value, as the economy appreciates or money in the bank appreciates and the two meanings are intimately connected, because when you appreciate the good in your life, the good appreciates.

Jen Fisher: I love that. I had not heard that before. That's great. Why don't doctors prescribe these things more then?

Dr. Tal Ben-Shahar: The reason why doctors don't prescribe these things is because they're not prescribed or given to them by companies that convince them that they are good, that show them the signs that they are good. So, many doctors are actually not aware of some very basic research done in the field of well-being.

Jen Fisher: So, it's not taught in medical schools?

Dr. Tal Ben-Shahar: Not enough. Many of our students at the Happiness Studies Academy are medical doctors, are professors in medical school, and they are teaching these things and they're asking why wasn't I taught this when I was in school? So, these things are becoming better known.

Jen Fisher: You mentioned rituals before and how important they are in terms of us cultivating our own well-being and happiness. Can you talk about that?

Dr. Tal Ben-Shahar: You know. I often ask my students to put their hand up if they have fulfilled all their New Year's resolutions that they had set to date or birthday resolutions or whatever. Hardly anyone. I have asked this to thousands of people. Hardly anyone puts their hand up. Then, I asked them to put their hand down and I have a second question, which is did you brush your teeth this morning? Of course, they all put their hand up. Now, the reason why so few of us fulfill our New Year's resolutions and all of us brush our teeth is because brushing our teeth is a ritual, whereas fulfilling New Year's resolutions relies on self-discipline. To bring about change, we cannot rely on self-discipline or willpower because we have very little of it, it's not consistent, it's unreliable. Whereas when it comes to rituals, these are automatic behaviors or habits. They're relatively easy to persist with. John Dryden, a British poet wrote, we first make our habits and then our habits make us, and the challenge is to make those habits. So, we need to identify one or two healthy habits that we want to introduce in our lives. For example, regular exercise or it could be regular appreciation and gratitude journal, like Oprah prescribes, or it could be a weekly date with my partner, whatever it is, but choose one or two, not more, and then introduce them once and then twice and then 50 times until they become a ritual or a

habit. Once that is a habit, then we can move on to the next one and use the very little willpower that we do have for cultivating the next one, but it has to be done gradually, slowly.

Jen Fisher: So, 50 days or 50 times.

Dr. Tal Ben-Shahar: So, it depends.

Jen Fisher: As they say, I've heard 21 days.

Dr. Tal Ben-Shahar: Exactly.

Jen Fisher: I've heard 50 days. I've heard...

Dr. Tal Ben-Shahar: Good. So, the reason you heard 21 days is because William James in 1890 wrote about it and that became the gold standard. Then, there is research that shows that even after 14 days, you actually see some neural pathways being formed and that is a sign of a ritual, but sometimes it takes three months or even longer. It depends on how difficult the ritual is to implement. It depends if we have to do away with an existing ritual and put something instead in its place and then it may take longer.

Jen Fisher: So, it's getting rid of a bad habit and replacing it with a good one.

Dr. Tal Ben-Shahar: Exactly. So, it depends, but when a ritual is in place, you feel it simply means you no longer need willpower. I don't need any willpower to brush my teeth. I just do it. Today, I don't need any willpower to go to the gym because it's a habit. It is making me do it.

Jen Fisher: I know when I don't go to the gym, I feel it.

Dr. Tal Ben-Shahar: Exactly, and that's a sign that your neural pathways have been formed.

Jen Fisher: So, you also talk and write a lot about perfection. As somebody, I guess I'm a self-proclaimed recovering perfectionist. So, how does striving for perfection impact our happiness and just talk about the psychology of that?

Dr. Tal Ben-Shahar: I end my book on perfectionism by saying my name is Tal and I'm a perfectionist. So, yes, I'm in recovery too. When we talk about perfectionism, we need to talk about two types of perfectionism. There is what psychologists call adaptive perfectionism and there is maladaptive perfectionism. So, when we're interviewed or many of us are interviewed and we're asked, "So, what is your weakness?" and so many people say, 'Oh, it's perfectionism,' by which they mean I'm so responsible and you can count on me. I'll always do it even if I have to stay up all night. That's not what is meant by the maladaptive perfectionism. Maladaptive perfectionism really hurts. It hurts us. It hurts our loved ones. It's a very painful neurosis, as Karen Horney describes it. So, what is it? It's about an intense fear of failure and inability to deviate in any way from the straight and narrow. Why? Because deviation from the straight and narrow means I'm no longer perfect, means I have failed, means I'm not good enough and living with that hurts us on many levels. First of all, we're less likely to take risks to experiment, and how do we learn best about ourselves, about the world, through experimentation. Second, it's a relationship killer because if I'm a perfectionist, then I don't want to hear that I'm imperfect, that something is perhaps wrong, that I have not done something at the highest level and every disagreement is an assault on the perfect image I would like to maintain, none would like, I have to maintain of myself. So, it hurts relationship because we're very defensive. I know this is where I paid

the highest price as a perfectionist. It also means that we walk around constantly with a sense of dread because the impostor syndrome, for example, is a derivative of that, procrastination is a derivative of perfectionism because we don't want to start because if we start, we may fail. So, we pay a price professionally, personally in every domain. The question is what do we do with it when we recognize it? Recognizing it is an important first step. What we do about it is we give ourselves more opportunities to fail, initially small ones and then bigger and bigger ones, get out of our comfort zone. Initially, it will be extremely difficult pulling ourselves up by the bootstraps, but over time, we'll be able to do more and more of it. We'll get used to failing, we'll get used to being imperfect, and then we'll realize the world has not come to an end, the people who love us still love us, and then we learn to love ourselves as well, a little bit more and a little bit more, and over time, we transform. When I talk about transform, I mean it literally, not metaphorically. It means changing the form of the way our brain functions in the face of risk, failure, or imperfection in general.

Jen Fisher: So, the theme of the World Happiness Summit this year is Resilience. Talk about happiness and resilience and how living a life of happiness can help build and sustain your resilience?

Dr. Tal Ben-Shahar: So, with your permission, I'll talk about Resilience 2.0 because today to be cool, you have to talk about 2.0.

Jen Fisher: So, we want to be cool. So, let's talk about exactly it.

Dr. Tal Ben-Shahar: It's exactly my point. So, Resilience 1.0 is about bouncing back. It's actually a term taken from engineering. You take certain material, or a piece of rubber and you squish it. If it's resilient, it goes back to its original form once you let go off the pressure and stress or a ball bounces back to where it was before if it's resilient. Resilience 2.0 is about bouncing back higher. It's about putting pressure on the system and the system growing stronger, bigger, better as a result of the pressure and stress. This is a concept that was introduced by Nassim Taleb from New York University when he talked about antifragility, which is the opposite of fragility, and that's Resilience. 2.0, growing stronger as a result of stress. There are antifragile systems all around us and within us. For example, our muscular system. You go to the gym, you put stress on your muscles, you break down, and then you grow stronger, bigger, healthier over time. We also find it in psychology that some people are able to bounce back from failure, not just to where they were before, but bounce back higher to actually grow stronger as a result of hardships and difficulties. The science of happiness is all about creating antifragile systems, psychologically speaking. It's all about teaching us certain practices, certain interventions that will help us become more antifragile, more Resilient 2.0.

Jen Fisher: I like that.

Dr. Tal Ben-Shahar: That was cool. If I can add to that, it's things like cultivating relationships. Of course, they make us feel better in good times and having strong supportive relationships can help us grow through hardship. If we express gratitude, of course, gratitude makes us feel better in good times and in difficult times...

Jen Fisher: Even more important.

Dr. Tal Ben-Shahar: ... even more important, because when you appreciate the good, the good appreciates.

Jen Fisher: I like that. So, how do you prioritize happiness in your life? What does that look like for you? We know exercise.

Dr. Tal Ben-Shahar: So, I exercise religiously. People ask me, 'So, what are you doing differently now during COVID?' I say, 'I do the same things, only more of them.' So, I exercise three times a week normally. During COVID, I've upped it to five times a week. When I wake up in the morning, the first thing that I do is take a few deep breaths and center and just these few deep breaths actually make a big difference rather than just getting up and getting into action. In addition, I do prioritize time with my family and friends. At home, we have no-technology zones and these are both in time and place. So, when we have dinner, for instance, there's no phone. If one of the kids is out of the house and we're expecting them to call, then yes, the phone is on the side, but other than that, there's no technology around the table. We're just there. Then, I do my gratitudes every night. I've been doing gratitudes every night religiously since the 19th of September 1999.

Jen Fisher: So, before it was popular.

Dr. Tal Ben-Shahar: So, why 19th of September 1999? Because that is when Oprah told me to do it. On one of her shows, she talked about a gratitude journal.

Jen Fisher: Her reach is far and wide.

Dr. Tal Ben-Shahar: Exact and I thought, 'Wow, that's a great idea' and I started doing it, and four years later in 2003, the first study on gratitude caught up with Oprah sharing just how helpful and beneficial it is.

Jen Fisher: That's funny. That's great. If I can pry a little bit, you increased your exercise during COVID from three days to five days. Is that because you had more time or is that because in times that are more difficult, we need to increase our gratitude?

Dr. Tal Ben-Shahar: Absolutely, the latter because I often ask my students, 'So, what are the times when you are least likely to exercise?' and most of them say exams because they don't have the time and I tell them these are the times that it's most important. As you put it, it's about prioritizing. If I had a meeting with my boss and my boss wanted to see me three times a week or five times a week, I would be there because it's a priority, no less a priority to make these commitments, have these meetings for self-cultivation, especially given that self-cultivation also leads to helping others.

Jen Fisher: In a world that's constantly disrupted, I think focusing on our self-care and our resilience and our own well-being is the most important thing we can do for ourselves and everyone else.

Dr. Tal Ben-Shahar: 2500 years ago, Confucius said that if you want to bring harmony to your state, you need to first bring harmony to your neighborhood; to bring harmony to your neighborhood, you first need to bring harmony to your family; to bring harmony to your family, you must start with the self. Creating, thus, these concentric circles and these concentric circles start with self-cultivation and then they go out. So, when people say to me, 'Pursuing happiness, that's a selfish pursuit'. And my response to that is it's not a selfish pursuit, nor is it a selfless pursuit, it's a self-full pursuit because when we pursue happiness, we're increasing our own well-being and by extension because happiness is contagious, because we become more generous and kind when we're happier. It's also about helping others. We're all interconnected in this web of empathy.

Jen Fisher: I love that. I can't think of a better note to end this discussion on. So, thank you for your time today. That was so full of wisdom and action. I'm grateful.

Dr. Tal Ben-Shahar: Thank you. I'm too.

Jen Fisher: I'm so grateful Tal could be with us today to talk about happiness.

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