

Naval

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Happiness

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A collection of all my episodes on happiness.

Live Long Enough and You'll Become a Philosopher

This podcast is a practical philosophy of health, wealth and happiness

Naval: Let's talk about why we're doing this podcast. It's really a discussion of highly practical philosophy.

Philosophy, as we normally think of it, is impractical. It's abstract and obtuse—something written a long time ago in fancy language. We put it on a pedestal and it feels unapproachable. Sometimes it comes across like truisms.

The big problems are the old ones

But if you live long enough, you will become a philosopher yourself. You'll have spent a lifetime solving the big problems in your life. The big problems are the old ones, the ones we've been trying to solve since the beginning: *How do I stay happy? How do I become healthy? How do I become wealthy? How do I raise the family I want?*

What one monkey can do, another can do

This podcast is about practical philosophy that has worked for us. What one monkey can do, another can. We want people to think, "If this person learned something that made them happier, healthier or wealthier, then I can do it too." That's what we focus on: a practical philosophy of health, wealth and happiness.

Nivi: If you summed it up in one word, it would be *health*: financial health, mental health and physical health.

Naval: Health is a state of well-being. Let's get to a state of *financial* health where we're not fearful day to day. That's where we started, and we spent a lot of time on that. Let's get to a state of *physical* health where we're not suffering from afflictions, disease and addiction. Let's get to a state of *mental* health

where we're relatively at peace and quite content with ourselves.

Happiness Without Material Comfort Is Playing on Hard Mode

It's easier to fulfill your material desires than to renounce them

Naval: You can achieve happiness without financial wealth. Most of us recognize you're not going to buy your way to happiness. But in modern times, you can buy your way out of common causes of *unhappiness*. Financial wealth can give you freedom and more time. It can give you peace.

Renouncing things is not an easy path to happiness

In olden times, one of the routes to finding peace was becoming a monk. You would renounce things—sex, shelter, money and other material attachments—and go off in the woods. You might find some peace after 30 years, when you'd finally gotten over the fact that you weren't going to have these things. The truth is, most of them probably never got over it. There are lots of monks out there but there aren't a lot of enlightened people.

It's easier to fulfill your material needs than to renounce them

It was Osho who said, essentially: "Every time I meet a prostitute she wants to talk about God. And every time I meet a priest he wants to talk about sex." Whatever you deny yourself will become your new prison.

Today it's actually easier to fulfill your desire for material comfort than it is to renounce it. It'll take you a lifetime to renounce material comfort, and it still might not work. But you can make some money and be materially successful in less than a lifetime.

You can achieve happiness without material comfort, and it probably would be a more lasting form of happiness. But that's playing on hard mode.

When you're sick, your desires run away

Physical health is the foundation of everything. If you don't have your physical health, you have nothing. A Confucius saying I like: "A sick man only wants one thing, a healthy man wants 10,000 things." When you're sick, your desires run away. Without the ability to get up and function, you can't turn into the desiring machine that you are.

Although physical health is the most important, I speak the least about it because it's the area where I have the least specific knowledge. I am not self-actualized in that regard. I'm in OK shape and have an OK diet. I understand the theories of physical health, but I would feel fraudulent offering it to you unless I were a paragon of physical health myself.

I've gone from being unhappy to being very happy

In wealth, I'm much more self-actualized. And on the mental health side—finding happiness and peace—I've gone from being a mostly unhappy person to being very happy. That was deliberate. It was practiced and effort-based. It happened through realizations. Because I made progress, I can tell you what worked for me.

Happiness Is Not Science or Math

Happiness is more like poetry than algorithms

Naval: *Happiness* is an extremely loaded term. It means completely different things to different people. Everybody has strong preconceived notions of what happiness is and how they can attain it.

There are many types of happiness

I'm going to conflate happiness, pleasure, peace, joy, bliss, contentment, well-being and more. I don't do it deliberately.

But at the same time, this is not math. We cannot clearly bound these words. They mean different things in different contexts to different people. So try and get into the spirit of what I'm saying, rather than getting hung up on specific words and details.

When some people talk about happiness, they're really talking about pleasure or thrills. They might say, "I had a really good meal; therefore, I'm happy." When other people are talking about happiness, they're talking about a general state of contentment and well-being. Other people are referring to enlightenment, like a Buddha would have reached.

Many people take the point of view that there's no such thing as happiness or that happiness is counterproductive—or that misery comes from pursuing happiness. There's a lot of truth to these ideas; we'll get into it.

Happiness is more like poetry than algorithms

I might say, "The way to be happy is X," and people will respond, "Well, didn't you just say happiness is a cause of misery?" This is not mathematics. You can't link algorithms together.

This is more like poetry. If you read 50 poems by the same poet and try to map them out analytically and map words from one poem to another and see if it makes sense, you'll miss the point. Don't fixate on the words. Don't even fixate on the sentences. Ponder the overall thought process and message.

Happiness Is a Skill You Can Develop

You're not stuck at your current level of happiness

Naval: The first step to increasing your level of happiness is realizing you can. This is where a lot of people get tripped up. For the vast majority of people, some of their happiness—probably a lot more than they think—is in their control.

This step is not easy. You might be stuck on this for a long time. Many people believe that happiness cannot be developed or changed, so they devalue it. They say, “Well, I don’t want to be happy.”

Genetics is important, but it's only half the picture

Genetics is important. It goes a long way in determining strength, athletic performance and intelligence. But your genetic set point is only about half of it. And happiness, or general contentment, is much more malleable than the other things.

It would be very hard for me to change my athletic performance dramatically purely by working out. I’m much more limited in that arena because of my genetics. But things like my temperament, outlook on life, how peaceful I am, how angry I get—these are much more in my control.

You're not stuck at your level of happiness

So, happiness is a skill like nutrition and fitness. Happiness is a skill you identify and develop that slowly gives you results as you get better at it. It is not God-given. It’s not handed to you and now you’re stuck with it—though if you start with a high setting, by all means keep it.

Desire Is a Contract You Make to Be Unhappy

Happiness is returning to a state where nothing is missing

Naval: Desire’s a contract you make to be unhappy until you get what you want. You become disturbed because you want something. Then you work really hard to get it and are miserable in the meantime. Finally, when you get it, you revert to the state you were in before you had it. It’s not like you achieve some peak level of bliss that you stay on forever.

No single thing will make you happy forever

People hold onto a delusion that there’s something out there that will make them happy and fulfilled forever. No single thing can do that.

Enlightenment is something different. It seems to be a permanent solution; but we’re not going to explore that just yet. We’re just talking about common sense happiness.

Happiness is a process of understanding and self-discovery

There’s no single permanent solution to happiness. Rather, achieving happiness requires a process of understanding and self-discovery. It is a process of training yourself to see certain truths.

If obtaining things made us permanently happy, then the cavemen would have been miserable, and we would all be deliriously happy. Yet, net happiness per person is not going up and might even be going down. Modernity probably brings more unhappiness than the past.

So happiness is returning to the state where nothing is missing in this moment.

If You're So Smart, Why Aren't You Happy?

You can increase your happiness without losing your drive

Naval: "Happiness is for stupid people." That's a common complaint I hear from smart overachievers. They think only dumb or lazy people can be happy. Entrepreneurs will say, "I don't want to be happy because I want to be successful." They worry that if they get too happy they'll lose their desire and won't work hard anymore.

Can you increase happiness without losing your drive?

Like everything else, there is some truth to this. Generally, the more intelligent you are, the more you can see behind the façade of everyday life being easy or safe. You see all the risks and downsides—the calamities that await us. You see the cynicism and manipulation behind so many things portrayed as being good for you or society. You become cynical, and you signal your intelligence through cynicism. Very smart people often communicate in purely cynical observations.

It's OK to not want to be happy. But we're going to explore whether you can increase your happiness without significantly lowering your drive or intellect.

Let's take the first objection: "I'm not happy because I'm smart." This is partially true. You are unhappy partially because you know and understand too much. You've been exposed to too much. But that doesn't mean that you can't be happy and retain your intelligence.

Figuring out the truth will lead to happiness

But don't get it backwards: You're not smart because you're unhappy; you're unhappy because you're smart. You can be happy and smart—it's just going to take more work. The good news is, smart people are good at figuring out the truth. The more you dig into certain deep truths, the freer and more peaceful you will become. That peace will lead to happiness.

If you're so smart, why aren't you happy? I absolutely believe that is true. The beauty of being mentally high functioning in our society is that you can trade it for almost anything. If you're smart, you can figure out how to be healthy within your genetic constraints and how to be wealthy within your environmental constraints.

If you're smart, you can figure out how to be happy within your biological constraints. But your biological constraints are a lot larger than you might think.

The dynamic range of happiness is quite large

If you've ever gotten drunk or achieved an altered state of mind on psychedelic drugs or through meditation, breathing or other hypnotic techniques, you have experienced brief moments of happiness beyond what you feel on a typical day.

Of course, some of this is a fake, pleasure-driven happiness. But there's truth to it; otherwise, you wouldn't desire that state.

Achieving these brief states of happiness can show you how dynamic your range is—and that range can be quite large.

How do you nudge yourself in that direction on a perpetual basis, as opposed to visiting it by stunning your mind into submission and silence?

Being Unhappy Is Extremely Inefficient

A peaceful mind makes better decisions

Naval: Besides "I'm too smart for it," the other objection is, "I don't want it to lower my productivity. I don't want to have less desire or less work ethic."

Fact check on that is: True. The happier and more peaceful you are, the less likely you are to run out and change the world. At the same time, being unhappy is very inefficient. A peaceful person doesn't have extraneous thoughts going through their head. If you're a driven, unhappy person, your mind will be on 24/7.

Unhappy people don't have good judgment

What are the consequences of this? You won't sleep well. You're much more likely to react with anger and dig yourself into a hole you have to dig out of. Your decisions are emotional and impetuous. You're more likely to get caught in the busy trap—busy all the time and running from one thing to another because you can't mentally prioritize.

When you don't have peace of mind, it's difficult to make judgments because you have too many threads going through your head. You don't have time to devote to making those judgments.

There's a tradeoff. If you become the Buddha tomorrow, it's unlikely you'll also launch rockets to the moon like Elon Musk. On the other hand, there are plenty of successful, optimistic scientists, innovators and other leaders—especially as they get older. Happy people aren't always ineffective.

A peaceful mind makes better decisions

When I got happier in my own life, I became much more effective—even though I don't work as hard as I used to. I'm able to form relationships with people who I would have kept at a distance earlier in my life, for whatever preconceived notions I held.

I make decisions much more clearly now, because I can see the long-term outcomes. I cut straight to the chase and don't try and negotiate an extra 20% here or there—because I know that's going to make me unhappy in the long-term, make the other person unhappy, and make the deal less stable.

I've become more productive even though I don't work as hard, because I make better decisions.

Work the Least for It

Happy people don't have to work as hard

Naval: The quality of our decisions is paramount in the modern age, because we're all leveraged. You can be leveraged through code, community, media, capital, labor and other ways. If you're smart, you leverage every decision you make.

If Warren Buffett makes the right decision 85% of the time and his competitors get it right 70% of the time, Buffett will win everything. That's a source of his strength: good decision making. He makes one or two decisions a year. Most of the time he's sitting around reading books, thinking, reading S&P, playing bridge, traveling and golfing.

Obviously, hard work is not the solution. Good decision making and high leverage is the solution.

A peaceful mind makes better decisions

Having a peaceful mind, being a happier person, relying less on momentary pleasure and being calmer will give you the frame of mind to make better decisions. Being happy will actually increase your effectiveness. As long as the increase in effectiveness is higher than the reduction in drive, you're well off.

Ask yourself: Would you rather be the best in the world by working the hardest for it or by working the least for it, because you worked the most intelligently?

Imagine you are the universal god. You are omniscient and omnipotent. You could change anything in the universe just by pushing a butterfly in one direction, because you know exactly how the particles will collide from there on out.

Omniscience is omnipotence. Knowledge is power. We can achieve happiness purely through knowledge, and that happiness will improve our decision making. That happiness will give us more time to read; make us more knowledgeable about how we operate and other people operate; make us more effective; and improve our judgment. It should also increase our earnings and the returns we need to be financially free.

The Modern Struggle Is Fighting Weaponized Addiction

Pursuing pleasure for its own sake creates addiction

Naval: On some very deep level, all pleasure creates its own offsetting pain and fear of loss. I recently tweeted, "[In an age of abundance, pursuing pleasure for its own sake creates addiction.](#)" I was upgrading a [Miyamoto Musashi](#) line, "Do not seek pleasure for its own sake."

Musashi was a Japanese swordsman. In his time, pursuing pleasure meant a very different thing than it does today. He didn't have unlimited processed food, Internet pornography, marijuana and alcohol available on demand.

Now that we're in an age of abundance, we can easily fall into addiction if we pursue pleasure for its own sake. And that's hard to get out of.

The modern struggle is really about individuals—disconnected from their tribe, religion and cultural networks—who are trying to stand up to all these addictions that have been weaponized: alcohol, drugs, pornography, processed foods, news media, Internet, social media and video games.

Addictions are fake work and fake play

Addictions let you engage in fake play and fake work. Before, you had to go socialize with friends; now, you can just get drunk with a bunch of strangers. Before, you had to go find a mate, create children and raise a family; now, you can just watch a lot of porn. Before, you had to hunt and climb trees to get fruit for a little bit of natural sweetness; now, you can buy all the gelato you want.

The modern struggle is standing up to these weaponized addictions. They give you small doses of pleasure, but they also desensitize you and expose you to the misery of their absence.

Breaking Addiction Is Socially Unacceptable

Addiction enables artificial relationships and activities

Naval: If you drink alcohol or take some kind of drug regularly, try the following thought experiment.

What events do you most look forward to? I'll bet they're the ones where you get to drink or do drugs. You look forward to dinnertime, an upcoming party or bar-hopping with friends.

To see how artificial it is, resolve to abstain from drinking or doing drugs the next time you go out. Now ask yourself how much you're looking forward to that event. You'll find: not at all.

This creates a conundrum. These sources of artificial pleasure eventually will desensitize me, bring misery when they're gone and lead to addiction. But if I give them up, I'll also be miserable because I'll no longer socialize with my friends. I won't go out, and I won't have fun.

Breaking addiction requires a new lifestyle

Breaking addiction is very hard, because you have to break the physical addiction and you also have to change your lifestyle. You have to switch to a lifestyle in which you can be happy without that substance.

If I drink to be social and do that enough, I'll find myself hanging out with people I wouldn't spend time with otherwise. When I'm sober, I can't tolerate these people, the topics we discuss or the venues we visit. I can only do it drunk.

Addiction holds together fake relationships and fake activities

These fake relationships and fake activities are held together by alcohol. If I stop drinking, I have to replace my friends and find new things to do. This is difficult and socially unacceptable.

I realized a while ago that it's a problem to look forward to weekends and holidays. First, it takes the joy out of the everyday, because you're living in the future and suffering the rest of time. Second, you have accepted a way of life in which most of your time is spent suffering.

Finding Peace from Mind

The mind should be a servant, not a master

Naval: Let's talk about peace, and then we'll talk about truth and how they relate to happiness.

When I say you want to be happy, what I'm actually saying is you want to find peace. We say peace of mind, but what we really want is peace from mind.

The mind goes quiet during the moments of greatest pleasure

During your moments of greatest pleasure—whether you're doing a drug, having an orgasm, finding your edge kite-surfing, laughing with a friend or looking at an incredible sunset—your mind goes quiet. It calms down, and that voice in your head goes silent. You achieve a sense of awe, which you might also call beauty, bliss or joy.

We all seek this. We all chase it. Deep down, what we're actually looking for is peace *from* mind.

Somewhere along the way, the mind became a master

I'm not making the mind out to be an enemy. It's a very useful tool. But somewhere along the way, it became uncontrollable. The mind became the master rather than a servant.

Our mind evolved to be paranoid, fearful and angry. Humans are the most paranoid and angry creatures to ever walk the earth. We are apex predators who dominated the food chain by killing, subjugating or domesticating every other species on this planet. We did it through fear, violence and, of course, cooperation.

Nature is brutal. Turn on any nature documentary and you'll see: A eats B; B eats C; C eats D; D eats E. Nature is red in tooth and claw. We are derived from violence and blood.

Our environment rewards pessimism and paranoia

Modern society's a lot safer and more peaceful. It still makes sense to be careful, maintain some paranoia and occasionally to get angry—but not as much as we're hardwired to do. It's okay to dial it down.

The threat level is not as high as our genes think. If you were walking through the woods 1,000 years ago and heard something rustling in the bushes, you'd be right to be paranoid. Let's say nine out of 10 times it's a rabbit in the bushes, and one out of 10 times it's a tiger. The optimist would catch a rabbit nine out of 10 times and get eaten by a tiger the 10th. The pessimist survives every time.

Our evolved nature rewards pessimism. But we live in much safer times, so we must find ways past that and work towards peace.

Happiness Is Peace in Motion

Peace is happiness at rest

Naval: In some ways, modern life is more hectic than prehistoric times. Our sources of stress are more chronic.

Let's define stress. In physical terms, stress happens when something wants to be in two places at one time. If I apply pressure to both ends of an iron beam, I create stress on the beam because one part wants to be north and the other part wants to be south.

Stress is an inability to decide what's important

In mental terms, stress is an inability to decide what's important. You want two incompatible things at once. I want to relax, but I need to work. Now I'm under stress.

When you give up on something, it's no longer stressful. When you accept that something's out of your control, there's no point in getting stressed about it.

The mind constantly creates stress, making you more paranoid or angry than situations warrant.

You want to find peace *from* mind. You aren't turning off your brain. You can't suppress the mind or force it to do anything. If I say, "Don't think of a white elephant," you'll think of a white elephant. Rather, you want to develop tools so your mind can calm down on its own. Then, stress will go away naturally.

How do you do that? How do you end up with a more peaceful mind?

Peace is happiness at rest

Here's a phrase I like: "Peace is happiness at rest; happiness is peace in motion." Someone who's peaceful at rest will end up happy when they do an activity. While a happy person sitting idle will be peaceful. The ultimate goal is not *happiness*, even though we use that term a lot. The goal is *peace*.

So the question becomes: How do you get to peace?

The first problem with attaining peace is that no activity will get you there. Fundamentally, peace is inactivity; it's a sense that everything is fine.

If everything is fine, you're not doing any physical or mental activity to change it. You're also not wishing you were doing something to change it, because that creates stress.

You cannot work toward peace, only understanding

You cannot achieve peace directly or even work toward it. Rather, you can work toward understanding. There's an old Sikh saying, "The name of God is truth." When you understand certain things and they become a part of you, you naturally become a more peaceful person.

The Closer You Are to the Truth, the More Silent You Become Inside

Wise people are quiet

Naval: I put out this tweet a while back: "The closer you are to the truth, the more silent you become inside."

We intuitively know this. When someone is blabbing too much or being the court jester, you know they're not at peace. You know Robin Williams was not peaceful inside.

Wisdom begets stoicism

We expect a wise person like a Lao Tzu or Socrates to be quiet—not because they're trying to look wise, but because they're internally quiet. We understand that peace and wisdom go together.

Kapil Gupta, who's written far more on this topic than I have, said, "Wisdom begets stoicism. Stoicism does not beget wisdom." As you become wise, you naturally become stoic. You don't become wise by being stoic. That's reversing the cart and horse.

As an aside, one of my tweets the other day got incredibly misinterpreted. So many people failed that IQ test. I wrote, "The smarter you get, the slower you read." The speed reading crowd got triggered, and people said, "Well, Bill Gates reads 150 books per year." Others said, "I read really slowly, so I must be smart." They got it wrong. I said, "If A, then B." That doesn't mean, "If B, then A."

Groups Search for Consensus, Individuals Search for Truth

What society wants for you isn't what's good for you

Naval: What's considered to be true is fought over. Individuals search for truth but groups search for consensus—and society is the largest group. So the biggest problem we run into is this: What society wants for you is not always what's good for you.

Even smart people go along with society's lies

Even smart, critical thinkers go along with many of society's truths, knowing deep down they are lies.

Here's a simple example: "Money won't make you happy" is a social truth, but it's not an individual truth. Look at all the individuals trying to make money. They know money can remove a lot of sources of unhappiness and get them to a point where happiness is under their control. It becomes their choice, as opposed to being inflicted upon them by external forces.

That is just one of many lies society tells you.

Another one of society's lies is that you send your kids to school for education. In fact, they get an hour of education a day and indoctrination the rest of the time. They're taught at the speed of the slowest student, and they're mostly taught subjects that are irrelevant or obsolete.

School is a combination of a bit of education, large doses of socialization and compliance training, and a massive dose of babysitting—which is helpful for parents who can't take care of their kids at home. It also keeps young troublemakers off the street.

School does a lot of things, but education is just a tiny piece of it. Homeschooling stats clearly show this, and even [unschooling](#) stats are starting to show it.

Guilt is society training you to be your own warden

Society does not just lie to you. It programs you to beat yourself up when you transgress one of its truths. Guilt is society programming you so effectively that you become your own warden. [Guilt is society's voice speaking in your head](#).

Truth-seeking is a hard business. You essentially have to understand, with deep conviction, things that you've been programmed to misunderstand.

The Path to Peace Is Truth

When self-improvement fails, work on discovering the truth

Naval: The search for peace is really the search for truth. Try to see the advantage of understanding things by discovering the truth rather than by practice.

When you discover the truth, bad habits can disappear

Let's say I'm trying to quit smoking. There are techniques I can try, but they're always painful and difficult. Often, a moment will come when I see myself in a new way that allows the habit to disappear by itself. I get a diagnosis of lung cancer and understand I'm going to die, or I see a friend get in trouble with similar bad habits. When I see something clearly enough and understand it, the bad habit can dissolve by itself.

More broadly, I may see some facet of myself that I don't like. Maybe I see it in a friend and then can't unsee it to the point that we can no longer be friends.

Self-improvement is just a dressed up form of self-conflict

Seeing and understanding things leads to changes that practice and technique cannot achieve. When you're following a technique, there's always a gap between you and the thing you're trying to achieve. There's always repetition, struggle and conflict.

If we want peace, we have to give up on self-conflict. We even have to give up on self-improvement, because self-improvement is just a dressed up form of self-conflict. Instead, we need to use our natural curiosity to understand things better. Through understanding, we will naturally improve ourselves.

Once we truly understand the effects of unhealthy food on our bodies—when we see the extra weight we're carrying, or we track the glucose spike and crash after eating too much sugar, or we see how caffeine hops us up and then crashes us—we automatically change for the better.

So, the path towards peace is truth.