

Change Absolutely Everything With Just One Hack – Robert Waldinger, M.D. – #1010

Dave Asprey:

You're listening to The Human Upgrade with Dave Asprey. I do my best on these shows to tell you what you're going to get out of the show before the show, partly so that I can tell myself what to focus on. But also so that you can decide that this one matters for you or that this doesn't matter for you, in which case there's literally 1,000 other episodes of The Human Upgrade that you could thumb through and find the one that's most important. You don't have to listen to all 1,000 of them. I'll still love you.

Today you're going to learn about happiness from someone who's studied it extensively as a science, looking at how relationships improve your physical impact in the world, mental stuff, emotional stuff, and how that environmental variable, that part of biohacking, that thing that you can control in your environment around you, which is the people around you, how you do that to live a good and happy life. How do you do that?

Well, Dr. Robert Waldinger is the director of the Harvard Study of Adult Development at Massachusetts General Hospital. He's only the fourth director in the study's history. This is something I've talked about on the show before. I didn't think I'd get a chance to talk with Robert, but since 1938, this study has been tracking two groups of men and their families to discover what makes a really good life. I've written on Instagram about this, I've blogged about it, and I've talked about it on other shows. But now we get to talk to the fourth guy who's been following this group for a very long time. He's written a book, call it lifelong case studies with a combination of modern psychological research, and the book is called The Good Life: Lessons from the World's Longest Scientific Study of Happiness. Robert, it's an honor to have you on the show.

Robert Waldinger, M.D.:

I'm really glad to be here. Thanks for having me.

Dave:

You're a professor of psychiatry, and somehow you got roped into this.

Robert:

Yeah.

Dave:

How did they rope you into doing this incredibly long-lived study?

Robert:

Oh, well, my predecessor, George Vaillant, the third director, was one of my teachers in med school, and he came and lectured about this study of all these people followed their whole lives, and I just thought, "This is the coolest thing imaginable to get to study all these people over and over again throughout their lives." Then many years later, he took me out to lunch and said, "How would you like to inherit this study?" My jaw dropped-

Dave:

Wow.

Robert:

And then I said, "Okay."

Dave:

Now, it seems almost like starting a religion or maybe one of those families that's been around for 1,000 years. They pass the secrets down in a sealed room with candles. Was there some sort of ceremony when you took over?

Robert:

There was no ceremony at all. It was, "Why don't you come over to our offices and look through some of the files and see what you think?" I spent a few days doing that, and then we applied for our next grant from NIH. We got the grant, and it was no more fancy than that. We just started together.

Dave:

What makes a good life? I'm asking you this as a guy who's in his eighth decade. You've studied this your whole life, so you must know.

Robert:

I am in my eighth decade. You're right. I am. Oh my gosh. The study is in its ninth decade. Whoa. So what is a good life? Well, what we found, which initially we didn't even believe, was that a good life is built on a foundation of solid relationships with other people. We didn't believe it because how could relationships prevent you from getting heart disease? How could relationships affect how likely you were to get demented or to get arthritis? We just didn't understand how that worked. So we've spent the last 10 years of this study looking at exactly how relationships get into our bodies and change us for the better.

Dave:

When they picked those 724 people in 1938, were they predicting this? Was there sort of a set intention or did this just emerge?

Robert:

This was a big accident. They thought they were studying some teenagers and seeing how they moved into young adulthood. They were going to study healthy normal development, they thought maybe five to 10 years, and then the study would be done. But my predecessors kept taking the records out and saying, "Let's keep it going." Most studies fall apart before the 10-year mark because they lose funding or too many people drop out. There was huge luck and tremendous effort involved in keeping this study going for 85 years.

Dave:

One of the things that I really liked about this ... So this is going back into the 30s, the world was a very different place. I think the definition of what makes a good life in 1938 would've been very different from 2018 or 2038. But they did have the early mindset to say, "What happens if we take a group of young men from Boston's poorest neighborhoods and some who are sophomores at Harvard?" So you got the whole socioeconomic spectrum, which is cool. When did it start including the descendants of these 724?

Robert:

That was with me. I came on in 2002, and first I brought in as many of the wives as we could find who would play with us.

Dave:

That would be kind of useful, right?

Robert:

Yeah. The women said, "It's about time you did this." So we brought in the wives, and then we started reaching out to all the kids who are mostly baby boomers, and more than half of them are female. So we broadened, fortunately, broadened the sample.

Dave:

How many of the original 724 are still around?

Robert:

Probably less than 40. We find out every so often when we check the National Death Index or when families write to us, and many families do write to us and say, "My family member passed away." But often we have to find out through checking with government records.

Dave:

Got it.

Robert:

The people who are still alive, those 30 some people, are all in their late 90s or early 100s.

Dave:

You gave a very famous TED Talk, one of the top 10 TED talks ever about this with 43 million views just talking about how good relationships keep us healthier and happier. So we've got our correlation. Do you know the causation? Why relationships do that?

Robert:

We're still doing research on that. We are, and lots of other research groups, but our best hypothesis with some good data is about relationships being stress regulators. The idea is that stress is a natural response to a challenge, and we're getting challenges day after day in our lives. That's a good thing. Heart rate increases, all these things happen to the body to meet a challenge. But then when the stress is removed, we're supposed to go back to baseline.

Now, if you have somebody who's a good listener, who's good to talk to in your life and something upsetting happens in your day, you go home or you call somebody on the phone, you can literally feel your body calm down, go back to that baseline when you talk about the stressor to somebody who's a good listener. What if you don't have anybody? What if you are so isolated that there's nobody on the planet you can talk to when you're upset? We think that that has a lot to do with keeping some people in this kind of chronically agitated state with higher levels of stress hormones, higher levels of chronic inflammation that gradually break down our bodies and our brains.

Dave:

Maybe that's why there are studies that show that getting a dog, but not a cat, makes you live way longer, something like eight-year difference in it. Some people say, "Oh, it's the microbiome because the dog licks its butt," but I think it might be the fact that you can tell your dog all your problems and it just looks at you and wags its tail because that's what dogs do, right?

Robert:

I think that's exactly right. Dogs give us pretty much unconditional love. More so than cats. Some cats do, but most cats don't. Dogs are just there to love us, and that makes a huge difference in our physiology.

Dave:

Plus dogs will chase cats away, which is a benefit, right?

Robert:

Works for me.

Dave:

Now, I'm so intrigued at a study this long. It's one of those things that kind of feels like it should be in a science fiction book or in Dune. We're going to do the Kwisatz Haderach, we're going look at multiple generations and maybe do a little bit of planning. Did you guys ever sit down and say, "What would happen if we got this happy person to meet that happy person? Their descendants intermix, and we create the uber happiness person who has rainbows?" Something like that.

Robert:

I love that. I love that. We can't do that. We have all these rules and regulations we have to follow because we're a research study, so we can't even tell study members who else is in the study.

Dave:

Oh really? Interesting. Okay.

Robert:

No. We can't ever reveal their names. Now, we have a few people who have outed themselves in public, so we can say their names, but otherwise we can't ... I couldn't tell you who was in the study, and actually we can't tell children what their parents said to us because-

Dave:

Oh wow.

Robert:

Yeah.

Dave:

Do you have any super famous people in the study? I know you won't tell me their names, but.

Robert:

No, I will because he was outed. John F. Kennedy was in the study, and Ben Bradlee was in the study, the editor of the Washington Post for many years who oversaw the exposing of the Watergate scandal.

Dave:

Back when it was a newspaper. I remember those days.

Robert:

Back when it was a newspaper. Ben Bradlee wrote about this in his autobiography, which is why we can talk about it.

Dave:

Ah. Okay. So they can out themselves, then you can talk about them. I get it.

Robert:

Exactly. Exactly.

Dave:

I do the same thing with my Neuroscience Brain Upgrade Program. If you talk about it, then I can use your name, but I never talk about people who are in it who just want to be confidential, which is cool.

Robert:

Yes.

Dave:

What's the most surprising thing that you have seen out of the study? Just the single most whoa factor.

Robert:

Probably the single most whoa factor is how many different twists and turns these lives take. A takeaway from that, which we find is, is that it is never too late. That people who think, "Ugh, my life hasn't gone well. I have terrible relationships. Life has passed me by," those people can find friendship, they can find love in their 60s, 70s, 80s when they never expected to. This idea that we just never know what's going to happen to us, I find truly surprising because we have so many life stories that demonstrate this fact.

Dave:

How much of your happiness is under your control?

Robert:

There was actually an estimate of this. There's a psychologist named Sonja Lyubomirsky, and she did a bunch of analyses. She estimates that 40% of our happiness is in our control. That about 40% is genetics. We're kind of born with a certain temperament. About 20% is our current life circumstances, and then about 40% is movable, changeable by us.

Dave:

Do you really believe that ... You've had a great career in psychiatry ... That we have a happiness set point. That you're just genetically 40% set to just be a curmudgeon and kind of have a hateful personality?

Robert:

Not hateful necessarily. Could be gloomy. Okay. Did you ever read Winnie, remember Winnie-the-Pooh?

Dave:

Absolutely.

Robert:

Okay. Do you remember Eeyore?

Dave:

Very much so.

Robert:

Thanks for thinking of me. Then do you remember Tigger, who's bouncy all the time?

Dave:

Yep.

Robert:

Those are different temperaments, and you probably know people like that. Some people for whom the glass is always half empty and they're really gloomy, and some people for whom it's always half full.

Dave:

I've seen so many gloomy people come in, and you do really deep forgiveness, neurofeedback, heart rate variability training. I feel like you can teach almost anyone to make the glass half full. It just requires dropping a lot of old traumas. It might be an environmental thing, not a genetic thing.

Robert:

Well, easier said than done. Part of my day job is I am a psychotherapist. I'm a psychoanalyst and a therapist, so I work with people every day, and I work with some people whose mood changes really fast when we have some sessions. It really gets better quickly. Other people for whom it takes a long, long time. That healing of past traumas, as you say, is possible for lots of people, but it takes a while.

Dave:

Do you think that's a predominant thing or even for that population, even if they healed all of their childhood wounds, all of their generational whatever, that still genetically, they're still just Eeyore and that's not to be changed? Interesting.

Robert:

I think so. I believe there are pretty good studies. The more technical term for it is temperament, and we think some of that is inborn.

Dave:

If you look at Ayurvedic systems or even Rudolf Steiner's work, which are very esoteric, but they still come up with the same general ... Some people are phlegmatic and some people aren't. Or you're a pitta or a vata or whatever so there's something going on there. I get that.

Robert:

Exactly. Because it's the same human life, right? We can look at it through all our different fancy lenses, but it's the same human being.

Dave:

What's the difference between thriving and being happy?

Robert:

Okay. Thriving. I think of it in the same breath with well-being, right? A basic sense of the okayness of life, which is different from being happy. So like, "Okay, am I happy right now?" So I'm having this interesting conversation with you, and I'm pretty happy right now. But an hour from now something really annoying could happen, and I won't be happy at all. But this sense of well-being, this sense of thriving is a way of feeling about your life that, "My life has meaning, my life is basically okay. I basically have a lot of what I need in order to be okay." That is what I think you're talking about when you talk about thriving. Nobody can be happy all the time. It doesn't matter how enlightened you are, it doesn't matter how much you meditate or what kind of diet you eat, nobody is happy all the time. Full stop.

Dave:

That's interesting. I mean, you must have a quantitative measure of happiness then. Is this EEG? How do you measure happiness?

Robert:

We measure it in different ways. No single measure does it. So I can ask you, "How happy are you?" I can give you a questionnaire and that's pretty good. That's your subjective report. But what if you think you're supposed to answer that you're happy because otherwise we'll judge you, right? So we also ask other people how happy they think you are. What if I asked your three closest friends? What if we measured your heart rate and your heart rate variability when we stressed you and then we saw how quickly you recovered? Or we saw how quickly you recovered when you held your romantic partner's hand? There are all kinds of things we can do. What if we put you in the MRI scanner, which we did, and showed you different positive and negative pictures, happy and sad pictures and saw what your brain networks were like and which ones lit up? So there were all these different windows on what we call happiness, and we use as many of them as we can.

Dave:

What does having good relationships in your life do to the percentage happiness metric now that we have a quantitative measure for it? This is really interesting.

Robert:

I don't know. If I gave you a percentage metric, I'd be making it up. What we can tell you is that when we study thousands of people, that the people with the better relationships are the happier and healthier. We can tell you something about what we call effect size, meaning how big. Is it a tiny little nudge in one direction or is it really a big effect? It's a pretty big effect. But I can't give you a percentage. Even Lyubomirsky's 40%, 40% and 20% is a rough estimate.

Dave:

It feels false to me or it feels like that's in an untrained mind because I know the state that I used to live in, and I know lots of people who've spent a meaningful amount of time meditating, and that 40% of stuff that happens in the world around you when you have mastered things, you're capable of maintaining your state even if the world around you is kind of falling apart. In fact, you can uptrain equanimity, which is that exact ability to do it. So to me it feels like 40% that you would ascribe, I think in that you ascribe to external circumstances or was that her 20% number? Whatever that number was-

Robert:

20% was your external circumstance.

Dave:

20%. Okay. So we should have at least 20% control really no matter what when we are psychologically, emotionally, or electrically trained, whatever you want to call that kind of stuff.

Robert:

But there's a limit to how much you can train any of us. You can stress any of us to the point where we're beyond our limits. And that's-

Dave:

Certainly. Between physical stress and emotional stress and all of that. Some of the world's greatest heroes have been able to withstand incredible amounts of stress like that in prisons and well-being repressed and things like that and somehow they pulled out of it. But I'm sure they had a dark night of the soul in there too. They weren't happy the whole time.

Robert:

Oh yeah. Oh yeah.

Dave:

Okay. Part of your research, in your book, you talk about how a good life requires growth and change, and certainly I'm doing my best to live that. In fact, I don't think we can avoid it even if we wanted to. But what I want to understand is you say relationships are a central player in the growth process in the book. How do relationships do that? Because it seems like changing relationships is part of growth and change also.

Robert:

Well, it is. In any relationship, in any two-person relationship, you have two continuously changing people, right? So there's always change happening in any relationship. But part of what we learn to do is

be agile with each other. When a relationship is good, you can start doing something new, and then I have to see what I make of that. I have to see how I respond when you change the way you operate in the world or you operate with me. In many ways it keeps us alive, and it keeps relationships vibrant and interesting. The trouble we get into is when we don't want to let each other evolve and change. Then there's lots of misery.

Dave:

So when your relationships or the people that you have relationships with in your life are holding you back, that creates a lack of happiness for you.

Robert:

Yeah. Yeah.

Dave:

Okay. Erikson made his Eriksonian stages of adult development, sort of these decades that people tend to go through. When you're young you can't see these because you just don't have context for it. It's like someone tries to explain what Mount Everest is like and then you go there one day and you're like, "Oh, it feels very different than what I imagined." Or you have a baby like, "Oh, wasn't what I thought it was going to be."

Robert:

Exactly.

Dave:

So what are the differences between this adolescence up until you're 20, young adulthood until you're 40, then midlife until you're about 65, and then late life? Walk me through what's happening and what you learned from your study with happiness in those phases.

Robert:

Well, Erik Erikson is the one you just named, and he was the first person to really lay this out as a set of what he called dialectics challenges, where you have a kind of dilemma that you want to solve at your particular life stage. I'll give you an example. Young adulthood is intimacy versus isolation. Young adulthood, he said, was the stage where you try to see whether you can achieve an intimate partnership with somebody or whether you're going to remain alone. Now, we don't do that only during young adulthood. We can do it in adolescence, we can do it in our 70s or 80s. But he said this is the time when you do a lot of it.

He then talked about midlife as a time when we deal with either generativity or stagnation. What he meant is generativity is this idea of investing beyond the self. So young adulthood, you find your partner, maybe you find meaningful work, but then in midlife you start to say, "What do I want to live on in the world when I'm not here anymore?" Because we begin to have these intimations of mortality. Then you think, "Okay, do I want to raise kids? Do I want to mentor younger people?" I mean, you have a mentoring group who's here with us today. Seems to me that comes from some generative impulses according to Erik Erikson. That, Erikson said, is the real issue for people at midlife.

Then he said that when we get to older age, we go through something called integrity versus despair. What he meant was that when we're more toward the end of our lives, we look back on where we've

been and we say, "Has this been good enough? Have I had a decent run of things?" Or is it despair? Is it a feeling of, "I've wasted my life." Those are kind of the three big adult phases that Erikson talks about. Then he's got a bunch of phases that happen earlier on in child development.

Dave:

There's a lot of debate over the different stages in early childhood development, I think still.

Robert:

And in adulthood. First of all, none of these stages are in lockstep, right? We're always dealing with some of these dilemmas, and we deal with them at different times. I mean, think about the woman who raises her kids and then becomes a corporate CEO in her 50s for the first time. Or the guy who makes his fortune in his 20s and then retires. I mean, these are such different life stages and life paths than Erikson envisioned. Now if anything, there are different timetables and different life paths open to us that probably weren't nearly as available when Erikson was doing his work.

Dave:

It seems like humans have been working on this happiness thing forever, but in modern recorded history you have actually the biggest and longest data set. I want to break it down. We talked about those big stages. If you are talking to someone who is just turning 20, and they've got their 20s to 30s and 30s to 40s ahead of them, what would the single biggest piece of advice for them to be happy, what would that be based on this study?

Robert:

Pretty much invest in relationships. If you invest in them in different parts of your life, including at work, you are very likely to be happy. So you can say, "Well, I've got to do my work." But actually what we find is that the people who are more connected and better connected at work are happier and more successful.

Dave:

Oh, that's a big one. Because we have this whole thing of quiet quitting now that some sort of nihilists are talking about where you're supposed to be miserable at work and you're supposed to hate your life, and then you're supposed to basically stab your colleagues in the back by not working as part of the team and just doing the minimum required until they quiet fire you. Which is also a thing that maybe young people haven't learned about yet. You're saying good relationships at work, which requires paying attention and being present, and then good relationships out of work. How does that shift? Now you've got the people who are in their 40s to 65 in Erikson's work, what's the biggest piece of happiness advice for that group?

Robert:

Well, then it becomes thinking about generativity, thinking about mentoring, investing in things beyond the self. I mean, one of the things that spiritual teachers have told us for millennia is that when we invest in things and people beyond the self, we really are happier and life is more meaningful. Midlife is a time when we may have the room to do that. It may be raising kids, it may be starting a nonprofit, it may be volunteering for a cause you love. Any number of things where you get outside the self, you get outside the I, me, mine and my tiny little tribe mindset and really say, "Okay, what do I want to have in the world that I can help put there?"

Dave:

I like that a lot. Okay. Then let's talk about late life. You're 65, although I think a lot of 65-year-olds would say, "Those numbers need to be updated because I don't feel like I'm in late life. I feel like I'm in midlife still," especially if they're doing the anti-aging stuff. But let's say, okay, 65 plus, what changes? So do you stop caring about mentoring? What's the biggest happiness hack there?

Robert:

No. You don't stop caring about mentoring. In fact, you may care more. Often people think more about what they want to have live in the world once they're dead. Because by the time you're 65, it's begun to dawn on you, "Okay, I'm really not going to be the exception to this mortality thing," and so you begin to think much harder about, "What should be here when I'm gone?"

I mean, think about how all of us are thinking about climate or many of us are thinking about climate change. I mean, I'm not going to suffer from the devastation of climate change anywhere near to the extent that my children will or that people coming after them will. Yet I'm really invested in this because there's something in me that says, "I care about what happens to the world when I'm not in it anymore." I think many people late in life have that sense that they do care and that it's an investment in the world. I think the advice I would give across the board no matter what age you are, is stay invested. Don't do quiet quitting from your life, whether that's at work or in your relationships. Quiet quitting is deadening.

Dave:

Wow, that's powerful. Don't do quiet quitting from life. Those are great words. So staying invested is what you do late in life. I've noticed something, and this actually comes from Burning Man, of all places. I ended up being the founder of a camp, and over time it grew to somewhere 50 to 70 people who'd show up. It's always the most fun when you have some, we'll just call them elders, people who've been around the block a few times and you have a bunch of people in the middle and you need to have a group of early 20 somethings.

What it feels like is happening in the context of relationships is that you're getting this transmission of wisdom from the elders, and you're getting a transmission of energy from the young to the elders and that if you really want to be happy when you're young, you should have some friends two or three times your age. I'm so blessed that that's how I learned about anti-aging was from people in their 80s when I was in my 20s and really sick and they were telling me how to fix it. I know I was giving them a gift of just being energetic and curious and reminding them of what it was like when they cared about things that I cared about at the time. Any data in your study about age range of friendships and happiness?

Robert:

We haven't studied it specifically. We probably have those data somewhere. We could probably do it, but we haven't looked at it specifically. What we do know though is that we can, for example, pair older folks with preschoolers. They often will have people in retirement communities go and spend time in preschool classes, and everybody loves it. The older people love the energy and the curiosity that the preschoolers bring, and the preschoolers love having these older people who will listen to them and read to them and talk with them and take them seriously. We know that combining, in just the way you're saying, combining the generations has huge payoff in terms of everybody nourishing everybody else.

Dave:

We used to do this in our tribes or our clans or even in our churches. There were these meeting areas where we'd bring a bunch of different age ranges together around some sort of shared mission, whether it's staying alive or connecting with God or whatever the stated thing is. But it seems like that's missing. You don't oftentimes go to yoga class with 70-year-olds and 20-year-olds in the same thing. It feels like we've parsed our kids so you're in school with only with people exactly your age. No learning from kids three years older or three years younger. Then we just kind of go through life. And these, oh your friends, they also have kids the same age as yours. So we're all kind of wearing these blinders.

What I would recommend anyone listening to the show does today is go out there and make a friend who's substantially older and substantially younger than you are. If you're 25, I'm serious, find a five-year-old, a niece or a nephew or something and take them out to lunch and just listen. You'll be like, "Oh my God. That did something for me." If you are 20 and you find someone who's 50 or even better yet 80, just get to know them well enough that they know something about your life and you know something about them. They will save you thousands of hours of suffering with a half hour of their time because they already did the work. A lot of my work is based on those conversations. But that just seems so important. Maybe that's part of what I want to ask you about next, which is social fitness. This is in your book. You talk about working out your relationships. So what is social fitness, and how do I get better at it? Because I probably suck at it.

Robert:

Well, we think of it analogous to physical fitness. So you go to the gym and you work out today, you don't come home and say, "I'm done. I don't ever have to do that again." But we often do that with relationships. I used to think, "Oh my good friends are always going to be my good friends." That I don't have to do anything specifically about those. What we find from our study and from life is that really perfectly good relationships can wither away from neglect. Not because anybody's angry at each other, just because you don't spend the time. So what we have been talking about because we saw people live this, is that the people who really actively, proactively made the time, called people up, had people over to their house, did things with people in the world, that the people who made those efforts again and again and again were the people who had strong healthy relationships.

So that means like for me, I'm a Harvard professor. I could spend every minute of every day working. I used to find that I would sit at my laptop and edit one more scientific paper that the world didn't really need or I could talk to my friend who I hadn't seen in a while or ask him to go for a walk or have coffee with somebody. What I've made myself do, now quite happily, is really deliberately make sure that every week, more than once a week, I see people who I want to be sure I'm with. That I stay in touch with, that I keep in my life. That's what we're talking about with social fitness.

Dave:

Does that mean that you should put it on your calendar?

Robert:

Yeah, you could. Absolutely, you could put it on your calendar. You could stop and think right now when you're done with this podcast, you could think, "Okay, who have I not seen in a while and I really miss? Who would I like to have some contact with?" You could just pull out your phone and send them a text. These little actions that you could do right now will have wonderful ripple effects. Sometimes I do that when I give a talk. Toward the end of the talk. I'll say, "Okay, everybody, think of somebody you want to connect with. Pull out your phone, text them now." Then sometimes during the question and answer I'll say, "Did anybody hear back?" People will raise their hands and say, "Oh, my friend just had surgery and

she was so glad that I reached out." Or, "I made a date with my friend for dinner next week." There are all these kind of little hits of well-being that come back to us when we do that.

Dave:

All right. So texting friends more often. Do you keep a list somewhere of your five closest friends? Are you conscious about that? Do you have a little rolled up thing in your pocket?

Robert:

I don't. I don't. Probably in my phone. I have a whole little, my favorites in my texts. I know who the favorites are and the people I'm most active texting with, emailing with are always there at the top of my feeds of various sorts.

Dave:

Do they know who they are?

Robert:

I have to be more mindful about telling them. You're raising a really good point, which is that we often don't tell people how grateful we are for them and that that's a huge source of well-being for us, the ones who say we're grateful.

Dave:

So saying you're grateful makes you healthier, and receiving gratitude makes you healthier. That's one of those perpetual motion machines that we can easily do.

Robert:

Oh yeah. Yeah. Everybody wins.

Dave:

Do you ever intentionally put together a dinner with all of your top five? Is that a good practice, or do you keep them separate?

Robert:

I don't keep them separate. What I've found is that having people meet each other is a great source of pleasure. Some people who I really like don't like each other, but often they really hit it off. It's fun to watch people connect, people I love connect with each other. So yeah, I share my friends.

Dave:

I'm relatively lazy about this stuff. I don't use lazy as a bad thing. Mother Nature wants you to conserve energy. Besides, I used to have Asperger's Syndrome, so I get to get out of jail free card. But I have a couple friends who've all been on the show, like Joe Polish or Mike Koenigs or J.J. Virgin and a few others who are just masters of connecting people, and they're always putting on events and I can go to those. I go to my own event, and then I'm surrounded by people that I like and all that.

It's almost like I have these amazing nodes in my life who generate relationships in a very easy way.

Anything in your study come out around those super connector types who just seem to naturally be more socially fit than the average person? There's always the Schwarzeneggers walking around looking amazing, and there's the socially equivalent of these body builders.

Robert:

Well, there were people in our study who were the natural connectors. There was one woman who worked in the payroll department of her company, and people just loved her, and she was always having workmates over for barbecues actually weekly. Their house was always kind of an open house. Now, not everybody's like that. Not everybody is that gregarious and not everybody needs that. Some people just need one or two close relationships. When we asked our study participants this question, it was really telling. We asked, "Who could you call in the middle of the night if you were sick or scared?" Some people could list several people. Some people couldn't list anybody. Some of those people were married, and they couldn't list anybody that they could call in the middle of the night. I think part of what we know everybody needs in order to thrive is a sense that there are at least one or two people in the world who they feel really have their back, who would be there if they needed them.

Dave:

That's a powerful gift to have people like that in your life. Part of what came out in your research is you found that loneliness made you more sensitive to pain, worse immune function, lower brain function, and that even your sleep didn't work as well. If you were lonely and you didn't have relationships, all of the problems got amplified. It's one of the reasons I moved to Austin from Vancouver Island, because living on a farm in the middle of a wet forest where there's very few people around, I don't think it was feeding me socially in a way that I need. I wanted to be in a place with enough people to be able to have in-person relationships instead of text only, which happens when you're isolated. Any data on people who live in the middle of nowhere versus people who live in busy social centers?

Robert:

We didn't have many people who lived in the middle of nowhere because the people who started in our study were pretty urban.

Dave:

They were Bostonians, right?

Robert:

Yeah, they were Bostonians or they were Harvard College undergrads from all over the country. But most of those people came from cities. There were some people who lived in rural places, some of them isolated, some of them not. But social, as we know, social isolation is different from loneliness. So social isolation is living in the middle of a forest. Loneliness can be living in the middle of a crowd and just feeling like you're not connected with people. Both of those are difficult for us, both emotionally and physically.

Dave:

You talked about the power of generosity already, where you tell the person you're grateful for them, they're grateful for you. What else about generosity drives relationships in your research?

Robert:

People who give of themselves feel better about themselves. So not just generosity with gratitude or praise, but generosity with your time, with your wisdom, with your resources, including your money. Generosity, giving somebody a ride to the doctor, coming over and helping somebody repair their deck, whatever it might be. What the World Happiness Report finds, this UN report, is that people all over the world say that one of the core aspects of a good life is opportunities to be generous. What we know is that people who are generous in all kinds of different ways feel better and feel life is more meaningful.

Dave:

It's true. I spend an enormous amount of time with entrepreneurs I'm advising on how to build their companies because I feel like I can save a lot of time. But it is a use of time and energy for me, but I think it's one that's worthy, and the net return for the whole system of people I think is pretty good so I'm willing to do it. You also talk about learning new dance steps as one of the things that energizes relationships. What does that mean?

Robert:

Well, it's back to that idea we were talking about, that we're all changing all the time and when we relate to each other in one way in our 20s, that may not be the right way for us to be with each other in our 30s or in our 60s. So we learn new dance steps together, certainly in a partner, in an intimate partnership in a marriage. In fact, the couples that really stay together stably and happily are the couples that learn new dance steps with each other, that learn to adapt as each person grows and changes. Otherwise, I mean, think about it. If you had to sign up at age 25 or 30 for an intimate partnership and you could never change one bit until death do you part, I mean, that would be an impossible straight jacket in which to live. So we need to adapt to each other. We need to learn new dance steps in our relationships.

Dave:

Got it. So continued evolution. I've seen so many relationships over the years of friends where one friend says, "I'm going to start working on myself," and the other one doesn't, and those are the relationships, whether they're friendships or marriages, where they don't last because the gap becomes bigger and bigger. There's also times when they're both evolving and they evolve in different directions. That's actually a healthy situation versus where one person's stuck and one person's not. But either way, it can happen.

I mean, I've had Esther Perel on the show talking about relationships and all, and it seems like there are more people who are getting divorced ... Certainly the data shows that than before if you go back a long time. Is that because of people evolving in different directions? Is that because of people just not learning new dance steps? What do you think is causing that?

Robert:

It could be both of those. It could be that what seemed like a good partnership at one time of life no longer serves either person very well later on. As you know, there's so many different reasons why people split up, why relationships don't last. But I think this idea of adapting to each other and learning to be together in different ways is certainly the key to having them last. Also, what we found in our research was that couples could argue like cats and dogs, and that wasn't a problem as long as they maintained a bedrock of affection and respect. That's important because here I am talking about good relationships and you can think that I mean, oh kumbaya all the time, that everybody's just blissfully

happy and there are never any conflicts. Not true. Every relationship has conflicts. It's really how we negotiate those conflicts that makes relationships stronger or weaker.

Dave:

That is the challenge, isn't it?

Robert:

Yeah.

Dave:

For sure. There's always stuff that you wish you wouldn't have done but that you did. Then you have all the hindsight's 20/20, and then you get all the guilt and shame and then you can have a career as a psychiatrist or psychologist doing therapy. Who would've imagined, right?

Robert:

Yeah. Really.

Dave:

You talk about a third aspect of energizing relationships, which is radical curiosity.

Robert:

Yeah.

Dave:

What is radical curiosity?

Robert:

It's just what it sounds like. It's being genuinely curious about the person you're with, including somebody you feel like you know like the back of your hand, that you know them so well. You know what they're going to say, you know what they're going to do. Often we feel that way about family members. What we find is that a way to liven up and energize a relationship is just to bring what we call in Zen, beginner's mind to long established relationship where ... Actually one of my Zen teachers gave me the assignment during my meditation, which is when you're looking at something or you're with someone who you know really well, and you've done this thing 1,000 times, ask yourself the question, "What's here that I've never noticed before?" The assignment is to find something new in what seems old and tired and well worn. If we could do that in our relationships, lots of interesting things start to happen.

Dave:

So it's radical curiosity about your partner or about yourself or is it both?

Robert:

Oh, definitely both. Definitely both.

Dave:

Okay.

Robert:

Because why am I reacting like this? Or am I really sure that this is true? Or this cherished opinion of mine, is it really true? How do I know that?

Dave:

That sounds kind of dangerous. I mean, what would happen if we had a world full of people who questioned their opinions and changed based on what the actual situation was? I mean, who knows what they might do?

Robert:

Who knows what they might do? I mean, there's a moniker in the first T-shirt I ever got that was a Zen T-shirt had on the back, don't believe everything you think.

Dave:

Oh, such a beautiful statement. One of the things I didn't say in your introduction is that you are a Zen master as well, right?

Robert:

Yeah.

Dave:

So there are many meditating people and other energy workers who use Danger coffee and all because it turns out when your mitochondria work better in my system, which is cross lineage, your mitochondria are some of the primary antennas of reality and that they see reality before your brain does. I can prove that from my neuroscience company, which funny is called 40 Years of Zen because the idea is to compact 40 years of daily practice into a week of really intense practice.

Robert:

Good for you.

Dave:

Well, thank you. I'm not saying that the wisdom that you get from being a Roshi comes with it, but that the exact mental state is possible electrically. That comes with an open-heartedness and loving kindness and deep compassionate forgiveness and all those can be induced very quickly.

But it's interesting that when you get down to the preceptors of reality, it's provably your cellular components see it, and then your brain gets it a third of a second later. So I'm like, what if we're using our hearts to program our bodies to better perceive reality and maybe even to affect reality? When I look at that in the context of relationships like this, the very beginning of the show, why do relationships matter?

A fascinating paper came out a couple weeks before we're recording this that didn't get all the press it should have. It'll probably be on my cool facts of the day on the podcast. I do a special episode once a

month about it. But for the first time ever, researchers looked at proton spin in humans and put it on a plot along with heartbeat. Lo and behold, every time your heart beats, the proton spin in your body changes, which is 100% absolute proof that we are quantum systems.

We've studied quantum biology for a long time, but that just proves something that we didn't know. So we are big quantum computers, which means we can affect all of the things around us all the time via entanglement. So it gets very interesting very quickly. I can't prove any of that's why these relationships make you happier, but if you focus your intent, you focus your will, and you also focus your heart or your beingness on another person with good thoughts. I don't know, I just spent a week hanging out with Joe Dispenza. He's got some really strong science that shows clinical outcomes from intent. I think there's a lot more going on under the blankets where we're not supposed to be looking unless we're really radically curious that says maybe we can propose a mechanism of action for why the people in your study have found relationships matter. You can look at it from what's correlated or you can look at it from what's at the very bottom. Why does it all work? How does it work?

Robert:

Yeah.

Dave:

Any theories there? What do you think from all your Zen experience? How does that come into this?

Robert:

Well, there's so much we don't understand with our rational minds. That's what you're pointing to, that a lot goes on. We didn't evolve to perceive reality accurately. We evolved to perceive reality in a way that keeps us passing on our genes. So there's so much going on beyond our ability to comprehend or even perceive it. It doesn't surprise me at all that you're finding these things, and we will continue to find so much more as our perceptual faculties improve. But we're never going to crack the truth of reality. We are just seeing the world to a considerable extent as we make it up in our [inaudible 00:54:41].

Dave:

We're seeing the world to a considerable extent as we make it up. That actually matches many different, both hard science lineages that I've studied. That reminds me of On Intelligence by, oh, the guy who started PalmPilots who refuses to come on the show because he wrote the book so long ago ... He doesn't want to talk about it ... And several others where it's hard. But then of course most of the secret and people from that lineage and a lot of the Eastern philosophies would agree with that. So what a beautiful statement. Did you just make that up on the fly?

Robert:

I've heard the idea from many people. That wording I probably just made up on the fly.

Dave:

That's very well put, so kudos. I'm putting your name after that and making a quote on Instagram, so there.

Robert:

Oh boy. Okay.

Dave:

All right. Another part of your book. I want to make sure we just download as much knowledge as we can for people on the show, people who are listening. You call it the person beside you, how intimate relationships shape our lives. So let's start out there. Attachment styles. Are you in favor of them? Are you opposed to them? Do you believe in them? What's the deal here?

Robert:

Am I in favor of gravity? It probably doesn't matter.

Dave:

I thought you might say that.

Robert:

Really. I mean attachment is. It just happens. We know that the human being has a long, long period of depending on other human beings for their survival. We need to figure out ways to stay attached to at least one other person who will take care of us because we can't take care of ourselves for a long time. That means we develop a certain style of staying connected to another person. Most of us are securely attached, meaning we can give and receive love, we can let each other come and go. But there are some of us who are really anxiously attached where we feel we can't count on someone to be there when we need them. Then there are others of us who are what we call avoidantly attached, meaning we try to pretend we don't need anybody because we're too scared of needing somebody. So there are these different flavors, and we're all somewhere on these different continuum of attachment styles.

Dave:

I've also come across ambivalent attachment as a fourth category. What's the difference between someone who's ambivalently attached versus someone who's avoidant?

Robert:

Ambivalently attached refers ... And often it's what people who've been badly traumatized emerge with into adulthood if they've been traumatized as kids ... And it refers to a kind of push-pull where it's like, "I hate you, don't leave me." It's, "Get away from me and I'm going to hold onto you tight," sometimes one moment to the next. It can be-

Dave:

Interesting.

Robert:

Very chaotic.

Dave:

There's so much wisdom and knowledge, and I wish I'd have known about attachment styles in my 20s when I first started having real relationships because I would've done the work. By the way guys, if you're listening ... And this is the second largest group of people listening to the show is in 25 to 35, so

there's tons of people in that category, and third after that is people in their early 20s ... So do the work to know your own attachment style. Once you get that, then when you start dating, okay, yes, they're cute. Yes, they're good in bed. Those are nice. But if their attachment style is not right for you, just hit the next button. Swipe right, it's okay or left, whatever. I don't know, I don't do online dating. But that's how you do it.

And if instead you say, "Oh they're cute, they're hot, therefore let's get into a relationship," and their attachment style pushes buttons for yours, welcome to 10 years of hell before you get divorced. It's that straightforward. If only they would tell you that when you were young. There. Now someone told you, and it wasn't just me telling you that. We've got a guy who's twice as knowledgeable as I am because well he's got a lot more mileage and he's probably better studied. So there you go. Anything wrong with what I just said there?

Robert:

No, it's pretty good. It's pretty good. It's really just to really, as you say, really pay attention to are our styles of being connected similar enough or are we like fingernails on a blackboard for each other?

Dave:

It's those times when you're physically attracted and there's clearly passion, but you're also fingers on a blackboard. Those can be some of the most addictive and harmful relationships, even for secure attachment people. That's the thing. It's all doable almost with surveys and with working with a therapist. If you're thinking about making a long-term commitment, moving in together or getting engaged or getting married or whatever, you might want to do that kind of work. If you want to do the whole poly thing, kudos, you have freedom to do whatever you want to do, but you might want to look at your attachment style, and it's going to be twice as hard because you've got to look at the attachment style for all the other people that you're going to simultaneously date.

I see a lot of people run into a lot of trouble in their 20s because logically you should just be able to be in love with 25 people at the same time, but I think your attachment system that's automated is going to do that until you do the work. Let's talk about family, because the people in your study, some of them presumably had intact families, some of them didn't. Early childhood trauma seems to affect attachment style. It seems to affect lifelong happiness. So what did you find from your study about early childhood?

Robert:

We find that it matters a lot, to state the obvious. But that what happens to us in childhood is really important in shaping our expectations of what the world is like. If you've been betrayed by the people who you're supposed to trust, if you've been physically or sexually abused or emotionally abused, it can seem like the world is a dangerous place. It's very hard then to trust the new people who come into your life. But new people can come into your life who you can come to trust, and then that reshapes our expectations. So again, the idea is it's never too late. Childhood, even if you had a difficult childhood, it's not a prescription for a difficult adulthood. There are all kinds of things that can change and all kinds of corrective healing experiences we can have as we grow up and move into the world and out of our families of origin.

Dave:

How many of the people in your study had the wisdom, the relationships, the advice, the therapists, whatever it took, in order to make that kind of a change? Or could you even tell?

Robert:

It was difficult to tell. We know that some of the most troubled young men who were on a clear path to prison, lives of crime and difficulty, were able to turn their lives around because they found a good partner. One of the things we know is that finding a good partner gives you a stake in the world and a stake in life that can really turn your life around. But we didn't systematically study it in the way that you're talking about, so I can't tell you what all 724 men did as they moved through life in that regard.

Dave:

What made you decide to go into Zen?

Robert:

I realized really when I was a teenager, and then as I got into adulthood, I realized how much stupid stuff I worry about. Stuff that doesn't amount to anything. Look, I would worry about did I get invited to this party or did I get that award? Then I would realize nobody cares. 50 years from now, nobody's going to care or know. Why am I worried about this stupid stuff? Why are other people worried about status, about having the right brand of jeans or sneakers or whatever it might be? Why do we worry about this stuff? Zen was the only ... Buddhism in particular, Buddhist philosophy, was the only philosophical system that I encountered that sort of made sense to me in this regard. Helped me think about why I was so preoccupied with things that didn't matter. It's helped me a lot to see through and hold more lightly some of the stupid stuff that I worry about and believe.

Dave:

Do you still have that voice in your head that's worrying about those things on a daily basis?

Robert:

Yes, I do. Now I can talk to myself a little differently about it and put it away sooner and calm down sooner. Somebody says something and I feel disrespected. Somebody cuts me off in traffic. All these things, these everyday irritants that I could ruminate about, I'm able to put away a little sooner.

Dave:

One of the other things that stood out that I hadn't considered from your Good Life book is that you say all friends have benefits, even the most casual of friendships. In fact, you say that it might be the most overlooked relationships you have. What is the value of these casual friendships? What do they do for us? What does it do for the others?

Robert:

Well, on a moment to moment basis, they give us little hits of recognition, little hits of well-being. The person who gets you your coffee if you stop for coffee at Starbucks or Dunkin' Donuts and you see that person again and again. That little hit of recognition of, "I see you," makes us feel a little better. The person who delivers the mail, the person who checks us out in the grocery line at the grocery store. So those are those little day-to-day hits of well-being that we get just from being recognized and exchanging a few pleasantries.

Then what we know is that people who are more peripheral to us are more likely to help connect us in new ways to new parts of the world. They actually did a study of which connections help you find jobs the most reliably. It turns out it's your more peripheral connections because the people in your close

network, you know those people, you tend to know the people they know. It's often the more peripheral people who can say, "Oh, I know somebody who does this." Something you might never have thought about or never be able to connect with until a more peripheral person in your life makes the connection for you. So just in a perfectly transactional way, more peripheral relationships can really be a benefit to us.

Dave:

That's beautiful. It's one of the reasons that when I go to Whole Foods, I wait in line for a cashier. I don't do the self-checkout almost ever. Number one, I like the idea that there's jobs in the world around me because I don't like the idea of a whole bunch of starving people with pitchforks. That's not the future I want to make. So it's nice to have that, and the human interaction's beneficial and healthy for everyone. You can be nice to someone. What I've noticed in the last year or so is that when I do that, I feel like cashiers have gotten nicer than they used to be. I don't know if that's because there's less of them or something or maybe they're just happy to be in the world without a mask on or something. But it's like there's just more kindness out there than has been before. If you're listening to the show, I'm not even kidding. Skip the self-checkout. Wait in line and look at the person who's checking stuff out, and you might be surprised at what you see in there.

Robert:

I heard a wonderful story today about customer service representatives and how beleaguered they are. Because people, when they're calling, they're upset about something. So if you can remember, be nice to your customer service representative.

Dave:

Oh God, yeah.

Robert:

They're often so stressed and they're dealing with you and literally 75 other people each day trying to help you solve a problem with limited real resources. I just heard about that as another place where you could spread some of your kindness and some of your well-being in the world.

Dave:

Amen. I started my career running IT, which is part of those help desk services, and those are the most abused, unhappy people ever are working the help desk. Except one in 10 people just gets this gleam in their eye that, "I'm just helping people all day long." It's like a continuous act of service, and they never get beaten down by the job and they're the best people at customer service. Because they've just embodied that, "Oh, the people who are calling me need help. No wonder they're cranky." I never got there when I worked the help desk. We tried to help.

Robert:

It's a hard job.

Dave:

It is indeed. Well, I think you are working on such a venerable project. This idea of now multigenerational what makes a good life. How are you going to go about passing the baton on? What's the process for that?

Robert:

Well, we make our data public, so we have to de-identify it's called, so it's confidential. No one can know who the individuals are. But then we make the data available to other researchers who, because we're not the only people who can think of important, interesting questions to ask using these data. So we're going to make it public. We're going to collaborate. We do collaborate with many other research groups, and we may be at a point where we want to pass the baton because we are a study of all Caucasian people because that's who you started with in 1938 in Boston. The whole city was 97% Caucasian.

We've only presented findings in the book that have been found in samples of people of color and other ethnic groups. But we'd like to see other studies carry this baton forward with different ethnic groups. It's hard to do because a longitudinal study takes so many years, but we are really hoping that this will be the future. That diversity, for us, diversity looked like socioeconomic diversity and it looked like gender diversity. But now we'd like it to be a different kind of diversity. We think other people can do that better than we can.

Dave:

That's really beautiful. Maybe there's a way to post all of the study data that you're collecting in a structured format so other studies can use the same format even if they gather more data. So then at least you could do a meta study using consistently gather data. It's that kind of multigenerational cross country, cross-cultural working together that unlocks a lot of the keys of what it is to be a human. We don't get born with an operating manual. I sure would like it if we did. It's our job to unlock this. As you know, because you've studied Buddhism, many societies would take a few of them, probably the weird ones, and say, "You go live in the cave and look at the wall and tell us what you see," and you go down this path of learning. That's the historical way of being a biohacker.

Well, let's just pay a lot of attention. We don't have the structured math and data, but eventually you can get wisdom with enough generations and enough time. What you're doing with this study is the quantitative version of that same venerable practice saying, "Okay, we're going to study the condition of humanity, but we're going to do it in a more precise way than has been done before." I think it's going to eliminate a lot about, a lot about what makes us happy versus what makes us rich or what makes us live longer or whatever else because longevity and wealth and fame and power just don't equal happiness in any way, shape or form. In fact, they're probably inversely correlated with it. So I love it, the work you're doing, and I'm wishing you the very best.

Robert:

Well, thank you. This was such an interesting conversation. I really appreciate it.

Dave:

Oh, you are so welcome, Robert. Likewise, it is always a great pleasure. One of the reasons I do the show is to get to talk with people who are more experienced and know more or other things than I do. So thank you for your life's work so far, and I can't wait to see your next book after this one. Guys, you want to read this book. It is absolutely worth your time, and it's called *The Good Life* by Robert Waldinger

Robert:

And Marc Schulz (Ph.D.)

Dave:

Oh, and Marc Schulz (Ph.D.) Thank you. He's got a co-author on there. I'm just interviewing Robert, obviously. Okay. Thanks again for your time. Keep teaching people, keep therapizing people if that's a word. Therapizing, it is now.

Robert:

Yeah. Yeah. Yeah.

Dave:

Okay.

Robert:

This was a pleasure. Thank you.

Dave:

It was a great pleasure. Thanks.

Robert:

Okay.