

BEACON Chapter 1 - Lesson 1 - Can we hope to be happy? transcript

[00:00:00] Hello and welcome. I'm Marie McLeod and this is the introduction to BEACON. I'm so glad you're here today we're going to be exploring the concept of whether or not we can hope to be happy. What happiness is, and how it compares with the concept of thriving. I want to introduce myself to you and introduce you to the science of positive psychology. So let's jump in. I'm going to share my screen and walk through some slides with you. So here we are. As I said in Chapter one and lesson one one can we hope to be happy.

[00:00:51] And I think the slides are going to move for me in a minute.

[00:00:55] And so firstly, I wanted to introduce myself to you. And I wanted to just tell you a little bit about my background and how I came to be doing this work. So I'm originally a Kiwi, come from New Zealand. I grew up on a farm there. I'm the oldest of five. I left home before finishing school and went to London to be in Nanny. I knew from a very young age that I wanted to be able to help others to live their best lives and as soon as I understood the concept of social work. That's what I wanted to do. So I trained as a social worker early and then in more recent years in adult education, in positive psychology. Personally, I now live in Melbourne and I've lived in Melbourne for 20 years with Gary, my partner, who's Scottish, and our three cool kids. And life is a lot easier for me now than it has been in the past. I guess that when we come into teaching something like this, it's important to share as I've said in the slide there. This is me perfectly imperfect and it would be an awful thing for me to start teaching something like this, without you knowing that I also have struggled and still struggle at times and perhaps the most profound struggle for me was having children.

[00:02:20] Gary and I had three children in two years and that really threw me into a very difficult time.

[00:02:34] We had twins and then we had another one and I then found out that one of the twins, our son Finn had high functioning autism and it was a very difficult time, full of dysfunction. Really. When I look back and in trying to get some support for my husband and for my son, fairly soon people are looking at me and saying, well, you're displaying full of depressive symptoms.

[00:03:00] And so down the pathway, we went really of people looking at our family through the lens of disability and dysfunction and deficit. And it felt wrong to me. And, you know, I really tried to find some different options. And it was at that time that I discovered the science of positive psychology and started to apply it in my own life and in an even increasing circles outwards as I discovered the power of it. And that's what I want to share with you in this series. BEACON. So can we hope to be happy? It's a big question and one that we might often ponder. And obviously there are many books written on this kind of topic and I want to explore that as we start this series. Firstly thinking about when we ask people, what do you think makes them happy? What are the kinds of things that they say? And this is a list here of the four top things that people say when they're asked this question and people often talk about the fact that more stuff will make them happy. So maybe a new house, a new car, a holiday. All kinds of things that people think when I have taht I'll feel happy or true love or the perfect body or face or more money. But today's things actually make us happy? The reality is that there is good news and bad news here. Our brains have an amazing ability to adapt and that capacity to adapt is really protective of us when bad things happen because it helps us to come back, up again to level a set

point of happiness. But the same happens when we have those blips of good things happening. So this graph here shows that scenario where we have a baseline. All of us a sort of set point of our happiness or well-being. And you can see that, you know, maybe we do get a new house or a holiday or a new car or we fall in love and we have that sort of momentary rise. But then we tend to go back down, going to the baseline. And the same if something terrible happens, you know that research shows that if we are in a car accident or get very ill or we lose a loved one, that we will have a period of sadness and we'll come down below our set point. But we will again return to that. So this is good news for us in terms of dealing with hard times. But it does mean that those things that we think might make us happy don't make us happy for long because of that hedon adaptation. So we tend to over estimate the influences of those factors and our environment on what will make us happy. And it tends to make us kind of stick around saying I'll be happy when dot, dot, dot and waiting for some elusive thing out there to make us happy. And that really doesn't make a great deal of difference apart from for a very short space of time. So how much control do we have and what are the influences to our happiness? This pie chart comes from Sonja Lyubomirsky and whilst these numbers might not be accurate, it's very hard to put a precise number on such things as this. It's a useful way for us to think about the extent to which certain things might influence our happiness or capacity to thrive. So you can see that many of us previously and in that conversation overestimate the influence of our circumstances. But actually here it's only 10 percent. It's a small amount of influence that our circumstances have and much greater influence is had by our genetic predisposition and importantly, a big chunk is related to what we think and do and that's the piece that I want us to focus on in terms of this series of work that we're doing. I would also like us to think that we can influence our genetic predisposition and we know now through neuro plasticity that we can change some of the ways that we are predisposed to be from our genes. So if we think about that, it means that maybe even 90 percent of those influences are available to us and that we can stop going around thinking I'll be happy when dot, dot, dot. Those external things happen to me because the chances are that's not going to be how it works.

[00:07:43] But is it actually happiness that we're after?

[00:07:48] Or is it something else? So there is a difference here between happiness, which we might see is a momentary rise in positive emotion, that kind of joy that we get the little girl in the picture with her ice cream or, you know, the return of a loved one or seeing the sunset or, you know, those kind of little lifts that we get that happen in the moment. Those are really what happiness is. And we tend to use the term happiness fairly loosely. But in this work, we would probably prefer to use the term thriving or well-being, sometimes called as well. And really thriving is a more consistent sense of feeling good and functioning well. So we have this more even notion. And that doesn't mean that we won't experience ups and downs, but that we have this more consistent sense that most of the time I can feel good and function well. And so you'll hear us talk about that concept of thriving. And why should we bother with something like thriving? Is it worth our effort? Well, an analysis of two hundred studies which was a meta analysis so a very large research study has found that people with well-being tend to enjoy a richer network of friends, more flexibility and ingenuity in terms of the thinking, that they are more resilient, they have stronger immune systems, and that they're more productive and earn more money. So there you go. It seems like a worthwhile pursuit and what we want to also explore is can we learn to thrive? Is this something that is possible for us? And this is where we think about the notion of positive psychology. And positive psychology as a newer branch of psychology that was coined by Professor Martin Seligman. And you can see here on this diagram in front of you that there is a range when we think about our

mental health. And in this instance, zero means that I'm functioning I'm ok. I'm not amazing I'm not terrible I'm just okay. It's sort of zero neutral point. And that when we fall below that and our mental health becomes suboptimal, that we oftentimes that's the point to which we would say, oh, we need to say someone, we're not feeling so good, we might be experiencing depression and anxiety. And that's the point at which we would maybe go and see, a psychologist. And in traditional psychology, the focussing then is around diagnosing what's wrong. Discovering what the sort of dysfunction deficit is and helping to fix that back to zero. Whereas Professor Martin Seligman say, well, is that enough? The absence of unhappiness doesn't equal happiness or the absence of thriving, doesn't equal thriving?

[00:10:58] So he said well, why aren't we paying attention to and researching and exploring what's beyond zero and how can we discover what it takes for people to move from functioning to flourishing or surviving to thriving. And so positive psychology exists in that Green Zone where we're saying, you know, what does the science tell us about thriving in people who thrive even despite adversity? And so that is the foundation of this series of work that we're going to be doing together. And what we're beginning to look at is how can we take those evidence based ways for, well, people thriving and apply them? Even when people are just surviving. So the question is, can we apply positive psychology interventions to support people experiencing mental health struggles in positive psychology? A lot of work has been done in helping people move from functioning to flourishing. So people are already doing okay and trying to help them to be better. So helping them to be weller than well, and perhaps less work has been done in terms of trying to help people to move from that sub optimal mental health space up to something that is, you know, they might not even hit zero but it makes a really big difference. Or can people move from below that zero mark back up to a positive mental health state? So actually, Martin Seligman put some work into this and it was discovered that positive psychology interventions actually achieve results above and beyond drug interventions for the same of mental illness. So he began to say, well, you know, we have this DSM-3 that tells us all things that are wrong with people. But how can we also start to focus on what's right with people and teach people strategies for thriving? So the interventions, positive psychology interventions are not just about relieving mental illness, but are also about helping people live happier, healthier and more meaningful lives. And so I I thought it would be good to think about as you enter this can you feel hopeful about this helping you? And I wanted to share with you there have been many people who I've seen had their lives changed by moving from a traditional approach of looking at how can they fix their depression or their anxiety or other forms of struggle and moving to take a positive psychology approach. But the lovely Kate is a story that I wanted to share and I hope that Kate will also record her own story and so you can look out for that. Kate, is someone who has struggled off and on and she's bulimia since she was about 14 years old, particularly in the last 4 years her depression has become very severe and she's been a frequent flyer at the psych hospital which is something that we'd all rather not be. Kate has regularly cut herself to relieve her anxiety. She has had bulimia and at their worst being sort of purging, throwing up eight times a day. And at the point at which Kate came to learn about positive psychology, she had been in hospital for three weeks, having ECT or electric shock treatment and whilst Kate is now living a much, much better life and much closer to thriving. It's not perfect, but I think Kate would describe the fact that she is no longer cutting. She no longer has bulimia. She's studying a course to be able to change a career and do something for herself and that she's running every day and enjoying that and has a lot of different tools and strategies and very much Kate is now an advocate of BEACON and this behind the scenes helping us prepare this to share it with others. So my hope is that you will hear from Kate as part of the journey and she can share with you her story.

And I don't tell this story or others out of arrogance in terms of the role that I might have taken. I tell it to share with you the hope that you might have, that this may help you in some small or large way to make your life better. So that's my hope. And you'll hear more soon when we get into lesson two of chapter one.