

Transcription details:

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Guest: Tim Bono, Ph.D, Washington University in St. Louis Psychologist and Lecturer

Transcription results:

Intro Welcome to The Next Frontier, where we examine what the role of the financial advisor will be in a world that's being disrupted by artificial intelligence and algorithms. Our mission is to spark new conversations that create stronger connections and build greater client confidence. Join us as we look at our industry and others through a new lens, and explore the opportunities emerging at the intersection of high tech and high touch. It's time for a new conversation. Are you ready?

BILL COPPEL Hi. This is Bill Coppel. And welcome to The Next Frontier. In this week's episode, we're continuing our conversation with author and happiness expert Tim Bono. A good portion of your research is focused on the predictors of well-being. Broadly speaking, they fall into three categories as I understand it from the book. The first is gratitude. And then there's the notion of a healthy mind and body. And finally, social connections. At one level, these seem like common sense items, but often we're not very good at putting them into practice. Let's dive into each one starting with this notion of shifting away from social comparison towards gratitude. Even before the rise of social media, social comparison was known to be one of the biggest barriers to happiness. But your findings from the studies related to Facebook were eye-opening for me. Tell us what you found and how that data put you on a path to address the fundamentals of what it takes to set out on a journey to well-being.

TIM BONO Sure. So when I first started doing this research, I was in my second or third year of my Ph.D. program. This was 2008. And it was just after Facebook had gone public, and a lot of students were getting Facebook accounts. This was before Instagram, so Facebook was really the primary social media outlet. And people were really excited to be joining this. People were out taking pictures so that they could post them, and they were so excited to boast how many friends they had on the social networking website. And at first glance, it seemed like this would be something that would be sending everybody's happiness soaring through the roof if you had a lot of friends and a lot of posts on social media. And so I started collecting data on this.

TIM BONO And one of the things that I found was that the amount of time these college students were spending on social media was correlated with all of the negative variables that I was collecting data on. So more time on social media was correlating with more homesickness, less happiness, more problems academically. They weren't getting as much sleep. They weren't getting as much exercise. Perhaps most ironically, the more time they were spending on social media websites, the less socially connected they felt to actual people. And I began to look at that and say, "Well, how could this be?" And one of the things that I found when I dug a little bit more deeply is that it wasn't a matter of whether a student had a social media account because by that point almost everybody did. I think there was maybe one or two students in the sample who didn't have a Facebook account, but everybody else did, and they were using it a lot. The bigger predictor was how much time were they spending on it and specifically how were they using social media. Because for those students who were using it as a way to

sort of have it as a means to an end such that they met somebody; then they connected on social media; they realized that they had common interest; and then suddenly, they were spending time together, "Oh, you're interested in the arts. Oh, let's go check out the art museum." Or, "Oh, hey, you're interested-- you play soccer. Let's join an intramural soccer team." Those students were using social media in a way that truly was increasing their happiness.

TIM BONO

But a large proportion of the students were using it in the opposite way that it became this vehicle for social comparison; that they would be in their dorm room lonely on a Friday night, and then they would turn to social media. And they would see other people out at a restaurant or out at a party that they didn't get invited to, and it only ramped up their anxiety and heightened for them this idea that they were lonely when it seemed like everybody else had lots of friends and was really happy. The other thing that I came to understand is that a lot of people were using this as a way just to boast and to sort of craft this digital media persona that made it look like they were out having all these amazing experiences. So they'd be out with a group of people who they really didn't know very well personally. But nonetheless, they were posing for pictures to make it look like these were their best friends. Or they would be out, and they were just kind of bumming around, not really having a great time. But then they get their phones out and, "Oh, let's do a selfie," to make it look like they're having a lot of fun. The picture was taken, and then they sort of went back to not actually enjoying each other. And those individuals who were using it in that way, not as a means to an end, but that Facebook and other forms of social media was sort of the end goal about attracting attention. Those were the people who really seemed to be taking a hit to their mental health in the ways that they were using it.

TIM BONO

And so I think that this highlighted for me one of the things that we all have to be mindful of because most of us nowadays are on social media, and we're using technology. But it's not the technology itself that is problematic. It's the ways that we're using it. And if we're only using it as a way to get lots of likes and get lots of attention and get the envy from other people because we've done such a fabulous job of making it look like everything is amazing, that's only using it as a way of comparing ourselves to others. And that's one of the recurring things of positive psychology that one of the biggest barriers to a sense of happiness is comparison. It's really hard to be happy if you constantly have your head over your shoulder worrying about how you measure up to other people and trying to make it look like you're one upping others instead of savoring the opportunities that you truly have to connect with other people. That's going to go a lot farther in our overall happiness.

BILL COPPEL

To address this dilemma that you're pointing out here, I want to go back to your definition of happiness for a moment. Which is "what we have" divided by "what we want." You propose that there's a powerful tool we can use to increase "what we have." How does that work?

TIM BONO

Sure. I mean, one of the simple things that we've been learning about a way to increase our happiness really has to do with the focus of our attention. And these

days, there are just so many opportunities to focus on the denominator, on what we want, how we wish life could be. Or we see people on social media. We think that their life is perfect. And then we get upset that our life is not as good as theirs. If we can catch ourselves in the act and redirect at least some of that attention up to the numerator by saying, "Okay. You know what? Maybe somebody else does have what I don't have. But what are the things that I do have that maybe I've been losing sight of?" That's the simple practice of gratitude. Which really has been shown in study after study to be one of the simplest yet most robust ways to increase our happiness. Because with gratitude, it's not actually going out and getting more things or buying a new house or buying a nicer car. It's simply shining a spotlight on the good things in our lives that we have that we may simply have lost sight of. And that's, I think, why it's been shown to be so effective. Because it doesn't cost you anything. It's not about changing anything about the objective circumstances of our lives. It's simply about carving out some time just to focus on good things. And there are so many different ways that we can practice this. There have been studies showing a very effective thing to do is to write a gratitude letter. Think about a coach or a priest or a rabbi or somebody in your past who has impacted you in some way that you never had a chance to properly thank them. Write that person a gratitude note. Send it to them. And they find that for months after, there's a significant increase in the psychological health of the individual who wrote that letter. Not to mention the benefits for the person who receives the letter.

TIM BONO

One of the things I've been doing personally-- a student from a couple years ago said that she wanted to keep a gratitude journal. But she knew that she would be more effective at it if she had somebody who was doing this with her. So she said, "Professor Bono, will you do this gratitude journal with me?" And she's already graduated. But we've been doing this for over two years now. Every Monday, we send each other a list of five things that we're grateful for that happened over the last week. And it's really remarkable. Even though I've studied this stuff, I sure enough have noticed a difference not only in my overall well-being but just-- as I'm going through my day, I think that I have become more tuned in to good things that I might have taken for granted, that now I think, "Hey. You know what? I think that I'm going to include that in the gratitude entry for this coming week." Even a simple thing. Recently, all the craze has been people making sourdough bread. And a friend of mine was telling me about this. And he sent me home with some starter that he had made. Which is, I guess, the basis of the sourdough bread. I'm still kind of learning it myself. But I thought, "Hey. Isn't this cool that I've got friends who have an interest in this who are willing to share it with me?" I think that that's something that, previously, I would've acknowledged in the moment and maybe feel good about in the moment. But by practicing gratitude for it and then actually writing a sentence or two in that gratitude journal, again, it's shining that spotlight on that good thing, and allowing me to derive even more positivity by reflecting on it and savoring it a bit more. So that's why gratitude is so important. It's about directing our attention away from comparison and onto the things that we already have that are good in our lives.

BILL COPPEL

Wouldn't it be interesting for an advisor to introduce this concept of a gratitude journal with their clients? What another phenomenally positive asset that could become. Which leads me to another positive impact of gratitude that you talk about in the book. And that's relative to our physical health. We know that good gratitude shows improvements in our physical health. Talk for a moment a little bit about the health and the connection of health and well-being as it relates to sleep. In our 24/7 world, why does sleep matter? And how do we intentionally establish routines that help us take advantage of sleep's natural benefits?

TIM BONO

Yeah. We know that at the foundation of psychological health is our physical health. One of the most important ways to take care of our minds is to take care of our bodies. Physical activity is a way that I think many people know is important to do. We know that when we exercise on a regular basis, the brain is releasing neurotransmitters that are in, essentially, the brain's natural feel-good chemicals. But one health behavior that many people overlook has to do with the importance of sleep. And sleep is one of those behaviors that there are all sorts of misconceptions about. For a long time, people thought that sleep was this passive activity, that it was sort of the act of doing nothing for eight hours at night that gave you the second wind to tackle the next day's activities. But what we've been learning from neuroscience-- just over the last several years, there's been all this research coming out, showing that when we are sleeping, our brains are incredibly active. Our brains are doing all sorts of really important work to strengthen neurocircuits that play out in things like mental acuity and emotion regulation. And it's part of the reason why if we haven't gotten a good night's sleep on a given night, the next day we are often irritable. We're on edge. We can't focus on our work as easily. And it's because we didn't give the brain the time that it needed to do that work that is so important to help us feel good and to focus on our tasks. So carving out enough time and managing our time during the day so that we're able to get a healthy amount of sleep at night, that really sets the tone for the next day and positions us to feel good about ourselves, to recover from negativity and adversity, and to really stay focused and be efficient in the work that we do.

BILL COPPEL

So staying with this theme of healthy mind and body, the reality is that nobody's happy all the time. Even when we take steps that you're talking about and introduce other techniques in our lives to help us ensure our happiness, we inevitably are going to run into obstacles and have days that are less than ideal. What are some of the mindsets or skills we can use to get through those times so that we're better positioned, for example, to have a successfully long run of happiness, if you will?

TIM BONO

Yeah. That's a really important question. And I'm glad that you raised that one. Because there are a lot of myths about the nature of happiness and its pursuit. And of them has to do with this idea that we're supposed to be happy all the time. There are some people who think that if they're not happy all the time, that something must be wrong with them. But any psychologist will tell you that if you were happy all the time, that would be the indication that something were wrong with you. Because we humans have evolved this incredibly complex set of emotions. And there's a time and a place for each of them. And knowing how to recover from adversity is very important for well-being. The happiest people are not those who never experience adversity. Rather, the happiest people are those who have a robust set of strategies that allow them to restore their moods when things are difficult or when they're going through a hard time. Among those strategies are things like getting exercise or getting a good night's sleep. But arguably, one of the most important ones is really having a strong social support system, having friends and family who can help you process things from a more rational perspective and recover more quickly from them and sort of get back up on your feet and on the path toward happiness and well-being.

BILL COPPEL

What you're really talking about is this notion of having this ability to be flexible in your mindset to overcome these obstacles. If you have a fixed mindset versus a growth mindset, that can be problematic. And I think you point out some research done by Stanford psychologist Dr. Carol Dweck. Can you talk a little bit about how that plays into this?

TIM BONO

Yeah. She's done some really important research identifying the different mindsets that people bring to goals that they are pursuing. And as you say, there's a distinction that she draws between a fixed mindset and a growth mindset. And really, the key distinction between those two mindsets has to do with the way that we respond to setbacks. If we have a fixed mindset, then we have a set of expectations that either we're good at something or we're not, and that if we struggle, if we have difficulty, that's an indication that we're just not smart enough or we're just not good enough at this task. And we sort of become indignant and throw in the towel and don't try it again. Whereas the growth mindset-- when that individual experiences adversity, their interpretation is, "Well, yeah. Adversity is par for the course. Of course, there are going to be difficulties and stumbling blocks that come across the way. So it's up to me now to consider what I need to do to maybe take a step back and reflect on this and think how I can approach this situation or this problem in a different way and develop a skill set that allows me to continue to overcome other obstacles as they play out."

TIM BONO

And I see this all the time with my own students. At Washington University, a large number of the students are pre-med their freshman year. So a lot of them are taking general chemistry. And for some of them, they get a C minus on their first chemistry test. Which for some of these students might be the lowest grade they've ever received. But it's more interesting to see how the students respond to this. Because some of the students come in and they say, "Gosh. I got a C minus on the first chemistry test. This means I'm not smart enough to take this class. I better drop. This means I won't get into medical school." And that's the way that they interpret it because they've got that fixed mindset. Whereas other students who were taking the same class with the same professor at the same university and get the same low grade say, "Well, yeah. I'm really disappointed. This isn't what I was expecting. But now I know what a college chemistry exam is like. And I know that I have to prepare differently for the next exam. So I'm going to meet with the professor. I'm going to meet with the TA. I'm going to go to the help sessions so that I can figure how I can modify my approach to this material so that the next exam I'm going to be better prepared and be able to perform better." And one of the things we're finding is that, for some classes, there's not even a correlation between performance on the first exam and overall performance in the class. A much stronger predictor of the performance is the mindset that the students take. Do they have a fixed mindset and then when they face adversity, they say, "Oh, this means I'm not smart enough. Better quit. Better withdraw. Do something else"? Or do they have the growth mindset and say, "Yeah. College is supposed to be hard. Life is going to throw me challenges. And when those come, it's going to prompt me to think about what skills I need to develop to overcome them so that I can continue to make progress toward this goal"?

BILL COPPEL

Okay. So let's recap for a moment. When it comes to these three predictors to well-being we've talked about, we've covered gratitude. We've talked about this notion of a healthy mind and body. The third is around social connections. You end your book with a chapter entitled "social connections". This really resonated with me because we talk a lot about it here at The Next Frontier. That is the value and importance of relationships and the life experiences that often come with them. Why is social connection such a strong predictor of happiness?

TIM BONO

Well, at our most basic level, we are social beings. I'd say that we are hard-wired with a need to connect with other people. And we know that there are a lot of benefits to those connections. We know that when people have strong connections with other people, they are healthier. They live longer. They have higher-quality outcomes

because the connection they feel with other people will often inspire and motivate them to work harder in other aspects of life. Plus, the time that we spend with other people offers a lot of benefits. We spoke earlier about how a strong social network can help us recover from adversity. And that's because when things are not going well, having other people help us get through it often will prompt us to process things more rationally and prevent us from having things blown out of proportion in our mind. Knowing that we've got other people around us means that we've got other people who are going to defend us from circumstances when things aren't going our way. And then when things are going well for us, having another person there to share those good times allows us to savor it even more.

TIM BONO

We know that happiness can be contagious. If you're having a good time on vacation and then you see a friend who's also having a good time, well, now you're happy because of the vacation and because someone that you care about is also happy. And that kind of continues to spiral upward. Plus, when you go on a trip with another person, you've now got someone who you can reminisce with about it for many years to come. In fact, just last night, I got a text from a friend of mine who said that, out of nowhere, he was thinking back to a trip that we took together last fall to New Mexico. And he was just texting to say, "Hey. Wasn't that a fun trip? I was just thinking about that. We had a lot of fun, ate at some really great restaurants." And that's what we know about happy experiences. They're not confined just to the moments when they occur. Sometimes, thinking back on them can bring just as much happiness. And that becomes more likely if you've got another person who's there to offer those reminders because it was that shared experience. I think there's even a saying, "Happiness is only real when it's shared." And I think that there's something to that. It's not to say that we can't experience happiness in isolation. But if we can share it with another person, then that happiness becomes even greater.

BILL COPPEL

Let me share an observation with you that I've made relative to sort of what I consider to be the atrophy of our connectivity muscles. Especially given the advent of social technology. What are you seeing relative to that?

TIM BONO

Well, there's been some research looking at this by demographers who look at things like changes in the proportion of people who experience happiness or satisfaction or anxiety or depression. One of the things that we've been noticing over the last ten years is evidence that there's been a decline in empathy, the ability to take another person's perspective or to be queued into their emotional state, and then to have the ability to respond appropriately. And there are many different explanations as to why that could be occurring. But one of the things that we know about empathy, like other skills, is that it's kind of like a muscle. The more that we practice it, the stronger it gets. If you practice piano, you get better at piano. If you practice vocabulary words for a foreign language, you're able to speak that language more easily. And it's the same thing with empathy. If we spend a lot of time with other people, we become better at picking up on cues that tell us something about their emotional state. And then we get to practice responding. But if all of our interaction with other people is happening on a mobile device through text messaging or through posts on social media websites, well, the semantic content of exchanging ideas only takes us so far. So much of our ability to understand another person's perspective and to communicate with them effectively is about non-verbal behavior that you can only glean when you are physically occupying the same space as other people. So because there has been a shift toward more and more of our interactions taking place from behind a screen or using a mobile device, we have not been practicing that muscle of empathy as well. And that likely could explain why there's been a decrease that psychologists have been observing in recent years.

BILL COPPEL

So how do we flip the paradigm?

TIM BONO

Well, I think that it's important for us to be wise consumers of this technology. To be clear, I'm in no way suggesting that we get rid of our phones or that we delete social media. But instead, I think it's important for us to be mindful of how those technologies can affect us and how we can use them as tools for connecting with others, instead of them being encumbrances to our well-being. Instead of allowing them to become vehicles for social comparison. Instead of allowing them to replace in-person authentic social connection. So it's great if we're using them as a way to find out who in our community shares our interests so that we can then spend time with them engaging in those behaviors. It's great for us to very easily be able to send a quick text message to another person to find out where they are or to see if now is a good time to chat. But hopefully, at some point, we're then able to use that as a step toward having an in-person, real-time conversation with that individual. If we can use technology as a means to the end with the end goal always being in-person authentic communication, that's where technology can be a great tool for us and something that aids our ability to connect with other people. But if it becomes something that is replacing authentic connection, I think that's where it has the potential to be problematic.

BILL COPPEL

And boy, I'll tell you - as we spoke about earlier in the conversation - there's no better time to begin to really think about this particular topic, as it's more and more difficult to have face-to-face conversations the way we used to. You kind of think about that, Tim, for a moment, and you look back and you say, "Boy, that is something I hope we can get back to." And maybe folks will begin to recognize how important that empathy that's derived from those personal interactions can play in our own happiness. We've covered a lot of ground this morning. Let me wrap it up with this question. How would you advise a financial professional, or any professional for that matter, to think about happiness and well-being for themselves first? Because we're just like our clients in many, many ways. And once they've embraced these principals, how can they help clients do the same?

TIM BONO

Well, when I think back to all the research that I've come into contact with in the 12 years that I've been studying the science of happiness, I can tell you with confidence that if we had only one piece of data that we could use to predict the psychological health and well-being of an individual, it would be the strength of their social connections. So in terms of the advice that I might give to a financial professional or anybody for that matter who had an interest in increasing their well-being, I would say, do what you can to develop strong relationships with your clients. Really get to know them. Let them get to know you. Find out what's important to them. Find out what their values and their long-term goals are. And let them know that you're going to work as hard as you can to help them make decisions that will position them to realize their goals and aspirations. And that will, I think, do a lot to strengthen the connection that you experience with that person. Also, as we discussed, we know that gratitude and the focus of our attention is like a muscle. The more that we use it, the stronger that mindset becomes. So helping draw their attention to the big picture when you're meeting with them or when you're speaking with them, that also can increase the likelihood that they'll be doing that on their own in their daily lives. And our best research shows that the practice of gratitude, and maintaining proper perspective also, is a very effective way to increase well-being and happiness.

BILL COPPEL

Well, Tim, I want to thank you for the time you spent with us today. As a financial professional, I certainly can appreciate it. And we believe that it's important for us first to work on these things as individuals, as human beings, before we can authentically turn around and develop the kind of relationships you're talking about

and help guide people to finding their own well-being. So on behalf of all of us at The Next Frontier, Tim, thank you for your time today.

TIM BONO

Well, it's been my pleasure. Thanks for the opportunity to discuss these things with you.

BILL COPPEL

For listeners interested in learning more about Tim and his work, you can find links to his information in this episode's show description. We hope you enjoyed our conversation today. Please take a moment to subscribe to our podcast. And if you like what you heard, please tell others about it. It helps people find us and ensures you never miss an episode. It's also a way to challenge you to think differently about your business and the role you play. And together, we can change the conversation. Thanks for listening. And until next time. Be well.

Outro

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