



#401: Why feeling pain is key to our happiness

VOICEOVER

This is *Up Close*, the research talk show from the University of Melbourne, Australia.

ERIC VAN BEMMEL

I'm Eric van Bommel. Thanks for joining us. Live well, feel happy, be positive. These are messages we're fed daily in the media and it seems we're swallowing it. It's difficult to assess the scale of the pursuit of happiness as it takes many forms, from pleasure cruises, to feel good movies, to live coaching, to chocolate cake. Entire industries are built on our desire for positivity, comfort and bliss. Then there's the flipside of happiness in our drive to escape pain or avoid the unpleasant, sometimes with catastrophic effect. In the United States alone for example, people diagnosed with opioid use disorder are now numbering in the millions, with a growth rate of more than six times between 2012 and 2016.

But is it fair to expect that our lives should be pain free or that we're in fact compromised by experiencing unpleasantness? Is there a useful meeting point between our sometime hedonistic tendencies and the inevitable pain that life can throw at us? You've heard the expression, what doesn't kill you makes you stronger. Well how about not only stronger but happier. Our guest on this episode of *Up Close* argues that as we seek to escape pain or unpleasantness we are weakening ourselves to adaptively managing it in the future. Painful experiences are in fact crucial for our development and how we face the inevitable challenges ahead, and yes, they're a key factor in our ability to feel genuinely happy.

Associate Professor Brock Bastian is a social psychologist in the School of Psychological Sciences at the University of Melbourne. His research focuses on pain, happiness and morality. His book on the utility of pain in promoting pleasure is entitled *The Other Side of Happiness - Embracing a More Fearless Approach to Living* and is out in 2018, from Penguin Books. Brock, welcome.

BROCK BASTIAN

Thank you, Eric.

ERIC VAN BEMMEL

So Brock, what's wrong with happiness?

BROCK BASTIAN

Well nothing really, I mean happiness is a good thing; I think everyone wants to be happy. It's probably more the question of what's wrong with how we think about happiness or how we try to approach or obtain happiness. It's certainly not to say that happiness is a bad thing. I think it'd be a very strange thesis and a very strange world if we lived in a constant pursuit of unhappiness, that would be quite a weird thing. I think that it's more how we promote the idea of happiness, how we define it, how we pursue it and how we understand it, which is where the problem lies.

ERIC VAN BEMMEL

So before we look at the role of recognising pain in the pursuit of happiness I think we need to be clear about what we're talking about. These words happiness and pain, they're broad and they mean different things to different people at different times in their lives.

BROCK BASTIAN

Yeah.

ERIC VAN BEMMEL

So how are we defining happiness here?

BROCK BASTIAN

I think the problematic definition of happiness is good feelings, euphoric mood states, feeling positive, thinking positive. The idea that happiness is somehow defined by positivity alone is the problem. So I think happiness, more and more I think we're realising that happiness is perhaps derived from things other than just feeling good. Often a real sense of deep happiness, and maybe you might use the word joy rather than happiness sometimes to try and describe a more meaningful, grounded, purposeful sort of happiness.

ERIC VAN BEMMEL

Is that what the Greeks call eudaimonia? The good life?

BROCK BASTIAN

Yeah, that's right, so eudaimonia involves a meaningful purposeful life from which happiness emerges. As opposed to I suppose that notion of euphoria where you are chasing good feelings and positivity and that form of happiness. So I think in a way we've become a little more focused on the euphoric notion of happiness and a little less clear on what the eudaimonic version of happiness is.

ERIC VAN BEMMEL

So if euphoric happiness isn't part of the avoidance of the unpleasant or the painful, how are we defining pain here in the way that you talk about it?

BROCK BASTIAN

One of the problems is that in trying to understand perhaps how negative experiences might play into happiness is in part definitional. So if you think about something positive and you say look that's a pleasurable experience, you can pretty much use that word pleasure to describe any kind of experience which is good, in that feeling good, pleasurable sort of way. For example we wouldn't distinguish between say sex and chocolate when we say both are pleasurable experiences. But when we talk about pain we get much more specific in how we want to apply that term.

We've often refrained that term to just describing physical pain, even just physical injury or medical versions of pain. Whether it's physical pain or pain which was related to some sort of perceived physical manifestation, that's a very narrow term, we even now distinguish that from social pain which is the pain of being rejected by other people. You might even say emotional pain or something like that. Of course physical pain is emotional pain, it's all experienced in the brain.

ERIC VAN BEMMEL

Being rejected is also emotional as well.

BROCK BASTIAN

Of course, it's all experienced in the brain. Then what we tend to do is we tend to use terms like unpleasant to describe this broad array of non-pleasant experiences. That to me it's unsatisfactory because the broadest term we have to describe all of these painful experiences in life is unpleasant, and it suggests there's something lacking in these experiences, specifically it's they're lacking in pleasure, they're un-something. Part of what I'm trying to do is just to try and promote this notion that perhaps we could talk about pain in this broad kind of way, contrast it with pleasure and then start to understand the relationship between these things, as well as in these more narrow contexts. But to zoom out on that term a little bit more.

ERIC VAN BEMMEL

So just to be clear we were talking about physical pain, emotional, social pain but also existential pain, a fear of death?

BROCK BASTIAN

Yeah that's right, exactly. Being aware of death, a sense of meaningless in life, that sort of termed existential pain as well. These are not terms which are generally used, they're not colloquial uses of the term. But in terms of thinking through the issue I think it's useful to try and use that word of pain in a very broad way so that we can contrast it, put it on the same level that we use the term pleasure, and then understand the relationship between the two of them better.

ERIC VAN BEMMEL

So historically how recent is our dogged determination to pursue euphoric pleasure? Have we always been this way?

BROCK BASTIAN

Probably in some way or other we probably have, but it's very hard to say is there a point at which we suddenly started to focus on euphoria rather than more meaningful and purposeful ways. I think we still do focus on meaning and purpose a lot. I don't have a specific answer to that, I think though that a lot of it has to do with probably the way that our societies have emerged where we now focus on materialism and consumption. If the purpose in life is to work so that I can afford the things which make me comfortable, if the purpose in life is to work so I can afford the things which I see in adverts make people happy, these things are constantly feeding to us that the purpose in life is to have these positive states and the way to get there is to buy the things which these people seem to be making them happy.

So I think there is a move in our society towards consumption, materialism, and that probably is related in some way also to this focus on euphoria and good feelings. I think the other thing is that we've become in the west at least far more focused, and for a long time this has been the way, on our own individual states compared to perhaps our relationships with other people, which tends to be more of that collectivist approach to understanding the self that you find in other cultures like in Eastern cultures, some more traditional cultures. In our more individualist Western modern cultures we're much more focused on our own personal states. When you think about those states you think am I happy or am I not, and that becomes about a feeling.

ERIC VAN BEMMEL

Sorry, if you go back 150 years or something where painkillers, analgesics were probably thin on the ground compared to these days, there weren't antidepressants, things that would dull us from physical and emotional pain. So is that consumerism? We're taking advantage of the technology that brings these drugs.

BROCK BASTIAN

When you come to painkillers I think that's a slightly different thing. When things are there that can take the pain away, I mean we're going to more often than not take the advantage of those. I certainly do for one, you'd be silly not to.

ERIC VAN BEMMEL

Count me in.

BROCK BASTIAN

Yeah, exactly. So I don't think that consumption of painkillers is the same sort of consumerism I'm talking about in terms of the products and services which feed into our own perception of whether or not we have these positive states. We're feeling good about things, we're experiencing the kinds of comforts and pleasures in life that we think we deserve, I think that's a different kind of thing. But certainly the ability to kill our pain is in another kind of way feeding into that where we not only think we deserve comfort in life and that we should have these pleasant and comfortable experiences, but we also have the capacity to eradicate pain when it does arrive.

So we really have this emerging ability to not only live a comfortable life but also

effectively live a bit of a pain free life, sometimes for some of us. Because of course there's plenty of people who still experience pain.

ERIC VAN BEMMEL

But it is marketed to us nonetheless.

BROCK BASTIAN

Exactly, in that way yes.

ERIC VAN BEMMEL

So are there evolutionary reasons to explain our desire for avoiding pain and or pursuing pleasure?

BROCK BASTIAN

Well yeah, very good ones, pain is a threat to biological systems. We're very attuned to avoiding pain, it's a signal that something is wrong and that we could potentially die. The notion of pursuing pleasure is a very basic human motivation as well. We built fires to keep warm and hunted to collect food and built shelters to protect ourselves from the rain. So all of these things are very, very basic drives to make our lives better. That basic level is very functional but I think that we've entered a phase where we have a newfound ability to achieve that.

Now we have all sorts of comforts which we can expose ourselves to. We live in climate-controlled houses and we have adjustable seats and we have a selection of cuisine on hold wherever we want to get it from. So we have these comforts available to us in a way we never have before, and we also have the ability to kill pain when it arrives.

ERIC VAN BEMMEL

We're so surrounded by these comforts that we've built for ourselves that in a sense being comfortable is the new neutral; it's not even pleasurable anymore you could argue.

BROCK BASTIAN

Yeah, that's right. The funny thing is, just because we have these comforts it hasn't really eradicated our experience of pain, it's probably in some sort of objective sense raised the bar a little bit. We pursue a lot of exquisite things these days. Going and spending a lot of money on a very, very fine restaurant is now not really out of the ordinary any further. For someone like myself I find my benefit for cost ratio in a bottle of wine stops at about \$25. But I think that we are increasingly being able to push ourselves further and further on that spectrum where we can distinguish between these indiscriminate small pleasures that we refine our senses too. But that shows that we have this infinite capacity to chase pleasure in the modern age.

What happens is when we don't have these contrasts in life where we surround ourselves with comfort and we don't always expose ourselves to these more painful and challenging and negative experiences in life, we lose some of those contrasts. It

means that the pleasures we do have become as you say a bit more of the new baseline, a bit more of the new neutral and so we keep stepping up. That doesn't mean we experience less pain, we maybe in fact experience more pain because we're more sensitive to displeasure in that way, we become more acutely sensitive to even the small pains in life.

ERIC VAN BEMMEL

We'll get into that in a moment. So Brock, you write that experiencing pleasure is an important pathway to finding happiness but pleasure alone will never achieve this goal. In order to find true happiness we need to experience pain. Now I think we have to be a bit careful here because there are plenty of people out there with serious physical conditions, illnesses etcetera, in a state of unremitting pain or discomfort, those who are in the middle of bereavement. Are you addressing those people here? Do we risk offending them?

BROCK BASTIAN

I certainly worried that there was a risk of offending those people, and there may still be and I do apologise if there is any offence. But I gave this talk at the British Pain Society on the benefits of pain, and these are people, anaesthetists, who deal with chronic pain. I was actually personally surprised the extent to which they were interested and engaged with the message. Because even though the people that they are treating are not experiencing pain for these reasons, they're not trying to get pleasure out of life by having chronic pain, certainly not, they want to get rid of that. But yet changing the value of pain, changing the way we think about it, our expectations of it, is a very, very important pathway to changing how we can cope with it.

So I think there's two messages. One is that pain can have these positive consequences but mostly the very notion of consequence suggests that there's a stopping point, there's a contrast point. You can't have a contrast if pain is endless, so it is very much about those pains stopping life, not about the pains that continue. But if we are exposed to pains that continue, endless pains and chronic pains, then simply seeing those things as negative, as bad, as detracting from our lives in some sort of way, which is often the way they set up to appear, doesn't help us to cope with them.

If we are going to cope with something then having a more nuanced perspective on it, understanding it from multiple perspectives, and even seeing that sometimes even though we would rather not have this, that it might have had some other kind of benefit in our lives. Even if that benefit doesn't outweigh the costs, still seeing that benefit is going to help to cope with that in some small way. I think there's two separate messages here, one is how we reflect on the pains that we would rather not have, the endless pains. The other one is that sometimes exposing ourselves to pains which have a clear parameter around them can lead to a contrast and help us to experience more pleasure in life.

ERIC VAN BEMMEL

On Up Close this episode we're joined by Social Psychologist, Brock Bastian, and

we're talking about the importance and utility of pain in our pursuit of happiness. I'm Eric van Bommel.

Okay Brock, you argue that we've developed a narrow view of pain, even though there may be more things that we feel inflicted on us, and we don't really appreciate its utility. So let's get into some examples here, types of utility that pain and negative experiences can bring to us.

BROCK BASTIAN

Sure, so beyond that broad contrast idea, which is I think a big umbrella philosophical notion that we need to have one thing to have the other, there's a number of specific things. One of those things is that pain does tend to bring us together close to others. We've run studies where we show that sharing painful experiences increases a sense of bonding between those who share in those experiences, and increases levels of cooperation within groups who endure pain. There's plenty of anecdotal evidence, anthropological evidence, which supports this notion too. Sharing experiences in general is a powerful way to form bonds with other people, but sharing negative experiences seems to be particularly powerful.

I certainly had a personal experience where I was exposed to the Brisbane floods when there was a massive flood through the city, and in response to that flood I think there was 55,000 people turned up to help with the cleanup effort. The pro-social response is huge; we saw the same thing after 9/11 in America, right across America rates of volunteering went up enormously in the weeks after that event. So people become more pro-social and reach out to other people through these negative experiences. I think also communicating those things to others is a great way to form bonds with people. Often we think that others just want us to talk about our positive things, they want to talk about happy experience, how are you going? Yeah, I'm great.

But actually telling somebody you're not going so great, telling someone that there are things in your life which aren't always pleasurable or positive but rather are difficult, negative, painful, can be a very good way of establishing bonds with people, and we often forget that too. So there's a real social side to pain. Pain is also a very powerful way to establish meaning in life as well, people often search for meaning after painful events, inasmuch as these events cause us or lead us to seek out meaning it often changes how we see the world.

So, often people who are exposed to difficult circumstances take stock in a way that they might not if those circumstances haven't happened.

ERIC VAN BEMMEL

You're assuming that finding meaning is aligned with happiness?

BROCK BASTIAN

No, I'm not suggesting that finding meaning is aligned for happiness. For example parents, there's research showing that parents find their lives more meaningful but they're actually less happy compared to people who don't have children. Because of

the cost involved of having children, the sleepless nights, the difficulty of raising kids, but yet they do experience more meaning. Again this is contrasting a sense of meaning to a sense of positive feeling in terms of defining happiness in that kind of way. But if you zoom out and make happiness a broader construct then meaning is part of that.

ERIC VAN BEMMEL

It's more satisfying when there's meaning?

BROCK BASTIAN

Possibly. I mean I'm not going to say that parents are more satisfied than non-parents. But I think that meaning often is derived from these difficult experiences. Sometimes people don't need to establish more meaning in their lives, sometimes people perhaps are happy floating along without that sense of trying to examine the purpose of everything. But it is true that when we experience pain it leads us to do that, and to the extent that we do that, that can also be a form of building happiness too.

ERIC VAN BEMMEL

What about expectations of pain? How we frame it in our minds, anticipating it, the discomfort of anticipating pain, is pain itself. Is there some utility there as well?

BROCK BASTIAN

I think the whole idea of expectation throws us back to why it's important to think about pain in a more nuanced way. If you look at pain or you expect pain to be simply just a bad experience then you're going to fear it more, and we know that fear of pain makes pain a lot worse. I think again this is talking about the way in which thinking through pain and its relationship to happiness and pleasure, the various positive consequences that pain can have for us, it changes our expectations of pain and makes pain easier to cope with. That's again feeding back into well what's the message got to do for people who perhaps experience pains they prefer not to have?

I think in that way we can help with the expectation of what it might be like and help to shape that expectation in different kinds of ways.

ERIC VAN BEMMEL

Are there situations where one has to go through hardship or pain to get to the pleasure at the other end and that that pleasure's not accessible otherwise unless you go through the pain?

BROCK BASTIAN

Absolutely, and I think we've forgotten that. The idea of endless pleasure sounds good for about five seconds and then you think about it deeply and you go oh, and you end up in the same place Aldous Huxley did, and you think actually you know what, a world full of endless pleasure would be pretty banal and actually quite excruciating. There's good evidence that we can't just have endless pleasure, eventually it becomes a new norm and then actually beyond that it can become quite

a form of torture in itself.

So, pleasure dissipates over time and we need the contrast between pleasure and pain to have those positive experiences. The other thing there is that having a negative experience leads to a more positive experience afterwards, more so than what would have been there if you didn't have the negative experience in the first place.

ERIC VAN BEMMEL

Can you give some examples?

BROCK BASTIAN

Yeah, so the runner's high, people often refer to the runner's high. You have to exert yourself with quite a lot of difficulty, and certainly running is painful, I certainly have a pained face on when I'm running in the mornings, but afterwards you feel good. Now you couldn't have that feeling if you didn't go through the process of running first, and you feel better than you would have if you hadn't got up and gone for that run. So the idea that you can somehow access that pleasure you get after the run without going through the process of the run, well it's just not possible. So it does build pleasure as well, we talk about this in psychology is an opponent process. When you go through a negative experience you often come out and have a heightened positive experience at the other end. Of course you go back to normal at some point, you go back to some sort of standard midpoint, whatever that might be.

But again that contrast of going through something negative then gives you another positive experience afterwards, and often we enjoy that and we get pleasure from that.

ERIC VAN BEMMEL

There seems to be evidence that even things taste better after some sort of hardship.

BROCK BASTIAN

Yeah, well we've certainly run some studies showing that after pain, people not only enjoy pleasant tastes more, they find all tastes more intense and they're more sensitive to specific flavours. We explain that less along the lines of this opponent process and more along the lines of another kind of thing that I think pain can do which is bring us more in touch with the here and the now. We work a lot from the example of physical pain, but I think there's crossover here. We don't have evidence from other areas but I know reflecting personally I think moments of sadness are sometimes moments when I'm most connected to what's happening right here and right now.

In moments of physical pain we certainly are because that's its function, it captures our attention. This is one of the reasons that we might go for an extra long workout at the gym or extra hard run when we're feeling bad, when we're feeling negative, because actually the pain in that experience stops us worrying and ruminating about tomorrow or about yesterday, it makes us more present. It's kind of like a shortcut to mindfulness in a way, which is achieved in a different kind of pathway but virtually brings us in touch - the whole point of mindfulness is to be more aware of what's

happening right here and right now, and pain does that for us. In the way that it can actually amplify another pathway through which it can amplify our subsequent experiences is because we're more attentive to what those things are right here and right now.

Again, people use mindfulness for eating disorders to make people more aware of the taste of their food, to be more engaged with what they're eating and the whole experience of it. Even anecdotally you know that if you go for a run, that Gatorade tastes twice as good afterwards. It's not just because you feel like you deserve it, although that is one other pathway. It's not just because you now have an increased release of opioids, which is that opponent process which underpins things like the runner's high. It's also because you're more aware of things, you're more connected to that experience in a way having gone through that painful experience first.

I suppose to go back to that notion before about how we understand pain, we actually seek pain out much more frequently than we realise that we do. It's just that when we seek it out in positive ways, when we go for a run we don't go I run because I enjoy the pain, the fact is we probably do. If you take the pain out of running we probably don't get the same enjoyment we would otherwise. A good example there is people who run marathons, you take the pain out of a marathon it becomes very, very pointless very quickly. You train for a marathon, you maybe raise some money from others for the effort of having gone through that marathon, and maybe you feel a great sense of achievement and other people pat you on the back afterwards. But you take the pain away from that, you make that marathon pain-free, then you're not going to train, you're not going to get any money for it, you're not going to feel a sense of achievement and then that becomes pointless and you probably wouldn't do it.

That sort of thought experiment helps us to realise that we actually are seeking out pain. We're not seeking out harm mind you, we're seeking out positive pain. But often in experiences that are positive we look back on it and think that was great, but part of what made it great was the fact it was painful, and we just forget that.

ERIC VAN BEMMEL

Socially we reward those people who've put themselves through that pain, as you were saying people who won run the marathon for example.

BROCK BASTIAN

Absolutely.

ERIC VAN BEMMEL

If they hadn't put themselves through pain we wouldn't laud them.

BROCK BASTIAN

No, and it's the same with every sort of challenge as well.

ERIC VAN BEMMEL

Doing a PhD for example.

BROCK BASTIAN

Exactly.

ERIC VAN BEMMEL

What's more painful than that?

BROCK BASTIAN

The whole point there is if you couldn't fail the PhD it wouldn't be an achievement at the end. If it was guaranteed, you wouldn't even try. So the very existence of failure, the very existence of pain makes most of what we do actually meaningful and purposeful. It makes it enjoyable.

ERIC VAN BEMMEL

I'm Eric van Bommel. Research psychologist, Brock Bastian is our guest on Up Close. We're talking about how we can integrate our experience of the unpleasant into our pursuit of happiness. Brock, your message in some sense is targeted at hedonistic western societies. How do other societies view happiness? Do they spend as much energy as we do pursuing it?

BROCK BASTIAN

It's a good question. We do know that in Eastern cultures, and when I say Eastern cultures I mean Japan, China, these sorts of East Asian cultures, the pursuit of happiness is seen as a kind of immoral pursuit, the idea that one would pursue happiness as a goal is seen as unethical in some sort of sense. You would pursue things like your usefulness to other people or be of benefit to others in some sort of way. Again we talked about this in terms of the individualism of the west, I think it is a Western cultural sort of thing to pursue positive states for one's own benefit purely. I think also in Western culture, at least in those what we might call the comfortable first world cultures, this is more of a problem.

This struggle for happiness is perhaps more real in other places, where to be happy is just to have enough food. To just to be able to have some electricity or some clean water, very, very simple things, there is a sense of real meaning there which is sometimes just survival. Whereas we're wondering why the latest four hatted restaurant, can you get four hats? Three hatted restaurant that we just went to, why that doesn't seem to make us feel like we're fulfilled in some sort of way. I do think the problem I'm identifying is more a first world Western type of issue.

ERIC VAN BEMMEL

Yet our Western first world has adopted mindfulness, which is originally an Eastern practice.

BROCK BASTIAN

Yes, absolutely.

ERIC VAN BEMMEL

As a coping mechanism for adversity, right? So we're taking their lessons as well.

BROCK BASTIAN

Very much so, and that's a whole other area that myself and some colleagues are very interested in, is understanding why the rates of depression between the West and the East are different. Yeah, we are flat out importing Eastern approaches to emotion management and thinking into our Western psychotherapy. So it suggests there's something going on just simply in the way that people understand the world and think about it over there that is of benefit psychologically.

ERIC VAN BEMMEL

What about religious faith? What's the utility there in both pleasure and pain?

BROCK BASTIAN

Well firstly there is some evidence that religion is higher in areas where people do experience more suffering. Often if you think even about the pathways to religion it's often through a state of personal suffering that people come to religion, come to Christ, if you want to use those sorts of words. There is a pathway through pain where people often take on these meanings and ideologies which help them make sense of life, and that can be quite a positive thing of course, to have an ideology which is structured in that way is very beneficial for people who want to create a more stable sense of meaning in the world.

ERIC VAN BEMMEL

Religious texts often depict painful episodes and getting through those painful episodes.

BROCK BASTIAN

Yeah, in actual fact when I was searching around for the benefits of pain I ended up in a lot more religious texts than I did in any scientific work, because religion does talk about the importance of sometimes pushing through these experiences or having these experiences in life. But of course religion also helps people to deal with pain as well because it provides hope, it provides structure, it provides?

ERIC VAN BEMMEL

Community.

BROCK BASTIAN

Yeah, as well, to the extent that that community is there then yes, you can link into it.

ERIC VAN BEMMEL

So, Brock earlier you spoke about how a crisis for example can bring social bonding and there's the dividend there from painful episodes for the group. What about in something like an intimate relationship, a marriage for example, do personal pain thresholds, the way that the individual in a relationship accepts pain as part of the give and take of a relationship, how does that impact?

BROCK BASTIAN

I think that's really important and I think relationships often fail when people aren't willing to put up with pain and challenge and difficulty. You do have to embrace those things, and often relationships can be very uncomfortable and you need to deal with that discomfort head on. I think in our modern day society we tend to walk away from relationships when they get hard, and look there's good reasons sometimes, sometimes that's the best choice. But also I think there's a tendency to see relationships as needing to be this ideal that we should always be feeling great together, we should also have this excitement we had at the start, and not often willing to deal with the fact that relationships can be very difficult and painful and hard and conflictual.

But out of that there is a lot of reward that comes in those relationships. There's also good evidence which shows that people who go through difficult times in their relationships early on in their marriage, they stay together longer. Being able to deal appropriately with challenges in a relationship predicts the longevity of that relationship.

ERIC VAN BEMMEL

Earlier you spoke of people who were runners for example, they know they're going to go through pain to get their reward, what about people who actively choose pain? We've heard of artists who inflict quite amazing physical pain on themselves in the hopes of getting some sort of insight, inspiration, creative impulse, what do we know about that?

BROCK BASTIAN

Yes, what we were saying earlier is that people do seek pain, they just don't realise they're doing it. But there are people who explicitly do do this, and what's interesting about that is how we view them. People who explicitly seek out pain and enjoy that experience, we often see them as immoral, of questionable character. If you think about the kind of person you might intuitively consider who's a pain seeker, this is because it's often attached to subcultures, whether it be piercing, tattooing, sadomasochistic sexual practices, these subcultures are often attached to this notion of pain seeking and it seems like perhaps there's something deranged by individuals who do this.

Yet when we zoom out on that and realise that actually all of us do this, I mean what's the difference between tattooing and chilli eating, if what you enjoy in that experience is the painful sensation? Ones' much more normative than the other but again we don't say oh I'm going to go enjoy the pain of chilli, we don't use that language, and again that's just a blind spot. I kind of refer to it as a pain blind spot where we are seeking the pain in the same way that the artist is seeking the pain or someone else is seeking the pain in a more explicit way. We just don't use that language, even though the psychological process is very similar.

ERIC VAN BEMMEL

So, Brock you've written quote, happiness is often found in those moments that we are most vulnerable, alone or in pain. Happiness is there on the edges of these

experiences and when we get a glimpse of that kind of happiness it is powerful, transcendent and compelling. Now that sounds good but how can people actually get themselves to better understand this relationship between pain and their own happiness, and what actual steps can they take? You talk about changing how we think and how we behave, can you get into some of that?

BROCK BASTIAN

Yeah, sure. I think first understanding the relationship, recognising the various ways in which pain plays a role in our lives, recognising that a lot of what we do in life is defined and given definition and purpose and meaning and even pleasure because it has these painful elements to it. Once we start to realise that, take off those blind spots if you like, you can start to actually play around with that notion a lot more clearly in your thinking in terms of what sort of things should you do to pursue happiness in life. Then that might feed into the sorts of choices you make. If we want to really get a lot of pleasure and joy from life should we go and spend all our money on a five star resort island somewhere where we can just laze away and enjoy ourselves?

Maybe we should be doing that, but if we do it endlessly we probably will not actually get much enjoyment from it. Should we be then exposing ourselves to a more challenging difficult set of circumstances? Whether that be physical challenges or even the challenge of going and doing something to contribute to other people's lives, which might not bring us immediate pleasure but which might bring us a sense of purpose and joy and fulfilment, and therefore around the edges of that, that positive, pleasurable feeling of happiness as well.

ERIC VAN BEMMEL

So when you're talking about seeking out experiences that are not part of the highly comfortable norm.

BROCK BASTIAN

Yeah, discomfort.

ERIC VAN BEMMEL

Discomfort, seeking out discomfort, that's taking a calculated risk is it not?

BROCK BASTIAN

Well I know that discomfort is risky, but yeah, it might involve risk. The notion of risk suggests there's harm attached to these things, and I'm not saying there's any harm attached to these things. There's certainly no harm in exposing yourself to an uncomfortable situation. Going and spending a night in the cold working in a soup kitchen is probably not a risky endeavour. It will be uncomfortable, it might not be very pleasurable, but probably afterwards you might feel a sense of achievement, joy and a deeper sense of happiness than had you of spent the evening perhaps enjoying culinary delights. Also sometimes the risk part is definitely part of this too. I think embracing risk a little bit more is very important, and we often are very risk averse.

We know for example that one of the factors of depression is that people stop taking risks. I don't mean here life threatening risks, I mean risks like going and talking to someone because they might reject you, or risks like putting yourself in a situation where you might fail, these sorts of risks. So exposing yourself to those sorts of risks in life, overcoming them, there's varying levels of those but I think any sort of push to do that will release some of this other side if you like of happiness, rather than trying to pursue those kind of pleasurable, comfortable sorts of pursuits that perhaps you mightn't commonly associate with happiness.

ERIC VAN BEMMEL

Should we teach our children to do the same?

BROCK BASTIAN

I think we should and it's really, really difficult as a father, I know that I would like to think that I could let my kids take the risks that they need to in life.

ERIC VAN BEMMEL

And that you probably did when you were their age?

BROCK BASTIAN

Well that's right, there's always that anecdote, when I was your age we used to, you know.

ERIC VAN BEMMEL

Go down to the creek and pick up snakes.

BROCK BASTIAN

Well yeah in some ways we did, and there is this notion the world is getting riskier and therefore we need to protect our children more. There's also a lot of evidence to the contrary the world is actually safer than it ever has been. I don't know that there's any objective reason why we should be letting our children perhaps take less risks than they used to. There are good social reasons because you can get socially derogated if you aren't looking after your children the way people expect you to.

ERIC VAN BEMMEL

But that becomes your own personal risk.

BROCK BASTIAN

Exactly.

ERIC VAN BEMMEL

We're talking about one's children here.

BROCK BASTIAN

That's right, so I think we have to question the point at which we are protecting ourselves from our fears and concerns over what might happen to our kids, rather than letting our kids experience the kinds of risks they need to in life to grow and

develop.

ERIC VAN BEMMEL

One other thing you talk about in terms of how we can change the way we behave is to embrace feelings of sorrow or loss. Do you want to expand on that?

BROCK BASTIAN

Yeah, inasmuch as in Western society those sorts of feelings have been devalued and we think that in a sense that we must be failing in life if we're not happy in the euphoric sense of happiness, and not experiencing states of depression, anxiety, sadness, sorrow. But that is a part of life and in actual fact it's a very important part of life, it's a part of life that we get a lot of meaning from, we connect to other people through, as we've just spoken about in so many other ways through this podcast. I think spending time with those experiences rather than running away from them is a really important pathway to getting fulfilment and value in life, and also spending time with those experiences that other people have.

Recognising that giving people that time, spending time with those moments in their lives as well is a really, really important pathway to not only promoting their happiness but also your own as well. Just being comfortable with those experiences is very, very important, rather than feeling like having them is an imposition to where you need to be getting to, to where you want to be going.

ERIC VAN BEMMEL

Brock Bastian, thanks very much for being on Up Close.

BROCK BASTIAN

Thanks, Eric, it's been a pleasure.

ERIC VAN BEMMEL

We've been speaking with Social Psychologist, Associate Professor Brock Bastian, about the need to integrate negative experiences in our pursuit of genuine happiness. His book on the topic is entitled *The Other Side of Happiness - Embracing A More Fearless Approach to Living*, and is out in 2018 from Penguin Books. Brock Bastian is from the School of Psychological Sciences at the University of Melbourne. You'll find a full transcript and more info on this and all our episodes on the Up Close website.

Up Close is a production of the University of Melbourne, Australia. This episode was recorded on the 10th August 2017. It was produced by me, Eric van Bommel, with audio engineering by Gavin Nebauer. By the way you may want to check out another of our podcasts, *Eavesdrop on Experts*, which features stories of inspiration and insight in conversation with researchers. Thanks for joining us and we'll see you next time.

VOICEOVER

You've been listening to Up Close. For more information visit

upclose.unimelb.edu.au. You can also find us on Twitter and Facebook. Up Close is licensed under Creative Commons, copyright 2017 the University of Melbourne.

© The University of Melbourne, 2017. All Rights Reserved.

Source URL: <https://upclose.unimelb.edu.au/episode/401-why-feeling-pain-key-our-happiness>