

Speaker 1: The Window Podcast is a service of the Belin-Blank Centre for Gifted Education and Talent Development in the University of Iowa College of Education. The Belin-Blank Centre offers comprehensive programming for students with talent in academic areas, visual arts, writing, inventiveness, and leadership. The centre serves teachers of gifted and talented students through professional development available both online and on-site. Go to the BelinBlank.org for a complete listing of resources.

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Speaker 2: Welcome to The Window.

Speaker 1: This is a special live episode of The Window, taking place at Mission Creek Festival in Iowa City, Iowa. Our guest today is Dan Lerner. Dan is an expert in positive and performance psychologies. His key message is that developing a healthy psychological state has a profound impact in the pursuit of excellence. His book, co-authored with Alan Schlechter is titled *U Thrive: How to Succeed in College (and Life)*. Dan is a faculty member at New York University, where he teaches the ever popular course, *The Science of Happiness*.

It's really great to have so many people here. This is exciting. You know, the podcast, *The Window*, is to take a look at some of the main educational issues, not only in Iowa, but in the nation, and bringing guests who have some real bold ideas about where we should go in education, but also people who are involved in helping others nurture talent to achieve their very best for all of us. And we're hoping that when people individually grow and flourish, that somehow also collectively, we will be a much better community.

Today's guest is Dan Lerner. Dan has been a musician. He is a strength-based coach for athletes, for artists, for musicians, and also for Fortune 500 executives. Dan is also an applied positive psychologist. And a positive psychologist means that he focuses on people's strengths as ways that it's our health helps us accomplish more, helps us just be better people in life. Dan is also a faculty member at New York University, and he teaches what is arguably the most popular course at NYU. It's titled, *The Science of Happiness*. Just the title will get me to register. And also, he is very involved in terms of undergraduate education. And he has a brand new book out. It's called *U Thrive: How to Succeed in College and in Life*. And just help me welcome this terrific, inspiring person. Dan.

Dan Lerner: Thank you all. Thank you.

Speaker 1: So Dan, welcome to our very first live podcast of *The Window*.

Dan Lerner: It's a pleasure to be here. Thank You.

Speaker 1: Great.

Dan Lerner: Thank you.

Speaker 1: I wanna ask you some, the first time you really came into contact with an exceptional accomplishment, ability, was really with your parents. Both your parents were professional musicians. I remember you saying as a little boy, that you would kind of hide in the corner, just kinda listen to them playing, kind of observing. And I'm just wondering, what did that little boy observe and learn that is still relevant to you today as a person, and also for the work that you do.

Dan Lerner: That's a great question. Thank you. First of all, thank you again for welcoming me here so beautifully and warmly. Watching my folks was absolutely my first memory in life. I used to sneak down the stairs after bedtime and hide on the landing, and watch my parents play music. As Nick alluded to, my father was in the Pittsburgh Symphony. My mother was a very successful opera singer. And it wasn't just the music making. It was the joy with which they made music. It was the joy with which they made music together. And being able to watch two people do something at such a high level, to do something at kind of a world class level, but also to take such great pleasure in it, that combination was really special to me.

So when I think about the idea of excellence, expertise, success, for really anyone in here, whether we're talking musicians or athletes here in the front row, or academicians, teachers, no matter what it is we're doing, the idea that we can be both very successful, and also have great well-being, is something that has stayed with me ever since those first memories.

Speaker 1: Let me follow up on that, because part of what we know, I mean, seems like to be successful, you've gotta work pretty hard at it. You've gotta put in your hours. But it seems that some people are successful, are fairly happy about life, and they really enjoy their success. And then there's others who are very successful, but don't seem to be happy about life or enjoying that success. Can you shed some light on how you see those two differences and why?

Dan Lerner: Sure. So, I went into the music business. First job out of college, I was an agent. I represented talent. And that divide became very apparent to me, that there were people who were very successful on stage, and very successful off stage, in their lives, and there were also people who were very successful on stage and not happy away from the stage, and that was a real challenge. When I began to study this, by time the business, when I went back to school, it became apparent it wasn't just with musicians. It wasn't just with my clients.

If we look around our culture I think we can see folks on the one side, let's take a Steve Jobs for example, who's incredibly successful by definition. This is one of the great change agents, entrepreneurs, brilliant minds, creatives in history, but was he happy? That's a whole other question. As opposed to someone like Richard Branson, who is enormously successful as an entrepreneur, as a creative, so on and so forth, but he makes time for his family. He makes time for things that are important to him. He makes time to help other people in the world. If we look across fields, whether it's Kanye West on this side and [Maya Angelou 00:07:49] on this side. If it's Bobby Knight, the coach, on

this side and Pete Carroll, the coach, on this side, you see a really sharp divide, but you're right.

For many people it seems that they feel if they're going to become great at something, and it doesn't have to be that level by the way, it's whatever we do in life, with a feeling they want to become great, they need to sacrifice everything else. There's no time for family if you're going to be great at something. There's no time for hobbies if you're going to be great at something. There's no time for spiritual pursuits necessarily if you can be great at something. Everything else has to go by the wayside because it requires so much work, but what we're seeing in research is that we actually have an advantage when we cultivate say, positive emotions, when we have positive relationships, when we have meaning in our life, when we're engaged in what it is that we do. For college students higher levels of positive emotion often translates into higher GPAs.

If you're so stressed out of school that you're not happy, it's more challenging to achieve what you're trying to achieve. We see it with athletes as well. We see it with musicians as well. We see it across the board. Relationships, you're going to get stressed out when you work hard, that's part of becoming excellent, but if you have no one to turn to, if you don't have a relationship that you can say, "I'm a little stressed out right now. I'm a little worried." Then you have nowhere to kind of alleviate that stress. So, what we're seeing is what we call today the positive. It's not that we're working any less hard, it's just that that hard work is more sustainable, it feels less burdensome on us.

Speaker 1: You talk a lot about finding your passion, what you love to do. So, how do we go about finding our passion? Is there a way for us to think about what does it mean to be passionately involved with someone?

Dan Lerner: Nick's bringing up something, which is really essential to the previous question, which is the idea of being great or being great and happy. When we look at studies of passion, there are two very distinctive ways to look at passion. Or at least, these are two different ways to experience and explore passion. One is what we call obsessive passion and that is when it's driven by extrinsic motivators. We do it because our parents want to do it, because the status is high, because we do it for the money, rather than we do it because we love it. When we do it for all those other reasons, the research shows that we have higher levels of negative emotion, we're more stressed out, we tend to injure ourselves because we overtrain for example. We burn out at much, much higher rate.

Well, when we look at the harmonious passion, pursuing something for the sake of itself because we love it. We get up in the morning and think, "That's what I want to do." When we do that we have higher levels of positive emotion, we have more positive relationships because we make time for them. We have other hobbies in our life because we know those things are important and we even have a greater memory, retention. We have more engagement. So, it's a huge difference. When we're talking about the key question, which is how do we find a passion? A lot of people think the passions are thunderbolt moments. You see something in your life and boom, "I know now I need to become a doctor, go to Doctors Without Borders. I know now that I need to give back to my community in a very specific way." Or, "I know now that I'm supposed to do X."

But the research shows the majority of passions are not found in thunderbolt moments. They're found in pursuing something that's simply of interest to you. For students in college for example, don't expect necessarily that you need to know what it is you're going to do for the rest of your life as a passion. If you're interested in one course, take that course, because that might lead to a second course, that might lead to a major, because you're pursuing something that you're genuinely interested in. Passions, we find, generally take about three years to develop.

I know it's kind of weird to put a number on that and say, "Well, how do you know three years?" But that's what we've found in the studies and even my little boy's a gymnast and there are athletes here. It's interesting is he used to say, "I do gymnastics." About three years in, and he was doing it at very high level, he changed the way he said that to say, "I'm a gymnast." When we start identifying with something in that capacity then we know that we sort of started on that boat of passion.

Speaker 1: I think this is an important message because I've talked to a lot of parents who wonder how much does their son or daughter have to give up in order to really pursue something at the excellence level. I think what you're saying is, you can really have it both, that if you don't give up relationships and so forth. It's a good reminder because it seems like people have examples of where someone gave up everything and then it all didn't quite turn out.

Dan Lerner: By the way, I just point out and add to that people who pursue things in that obsessive way, one thing and one thing only, for parents out there or for students out there who are thinking, "This is the way it has to be done." The breaks are burn out, burn out goes through the roof. So, can you imagine helping your kid pursue something they love or something that you think is great for 10, 12, 15 years and one day they come to you and say, "I actually can't do this anymore. I'm done. I'm tired of it. I've done way too much of that. I need to step away." They haven't had the support. Where are they going to go next? They don't know what else to do. That's the unhappy part, I think.

Speaker 1: You had an interesting story in your book about Roger Bannister, who was the first person to ever break the four minute mile, and at that time it was seen as impossible, but he did it in 1954, but the amazing thing that you bring out is that after he broke that mile in that same year, about another four or five times that four minute mile was broken. And it's this whole thing where it lifted in mindset and you talk about mindset, about how they can limit us and how they can also enhance us. I think that's really interesting. If you could talk a bit about how mindsets work on how we see ourselves.

Dan Lerner: Sure. The Bannister example is terrific because everyone said it couldn't be done, it's impossible. As Nick points out, as soon as that record gets broken almost 40 people in the course of next year break it. High schoolers now break it, but why couldn't they break it before? What kept them from breaking a four minute mile? I'm not saying it's easy. I certainly can't run a four minute mile. I can't run an eight minute mile, but it's not an easy thing, but all of a sudden, that barrier's lifted and we realised that something's possible. So, we allow ourselves to push a little further knowing that that might be something that we can do.

It's one of the reasons why exemplars are so important, why people who look up to are so important. Everyone here thinks about who they look up to, who an exemplar is in their lives. The odds are, and it doesn't have to be a famous person. It can be a parent. For many of my students it is a parent or grandparent. Those people, they've gone beyond what we think is possible. They've loved us more than we thought was possible, even though we've been little idiots when we were young. If it is in sport, we've seen people do extraordinary things. In music, extraordinary things. So, it resets the bar, which is so important. Now, the another aspect of mindset, I think, and this speaks to, we were talking about before, was we see this in kids a lot, but it's certainly applicable for everybody, is that idea of do we have a fixed mindset or do we have a growth mindset?

A fixed mindset is that mindset where let's say we do poorly in a test, we don't do well in a meeting and we think, "I can't get any better. This is my limit. I'm just not bright enough to do any better." So, what happens as a result? We basically stop trying. We've just lowered our bar and accepted the fact that we'll never be any better than this. That's a really challenging thing, but when we look at a growth mindset, and this is work of Carol Dweck out at Stanford. When we look at a growth mindset it's the idea that if I work harder, I can get better, that there are barriers that I can break through. And we have that, it's much more likely that we will be able to keep moving, growing, learning, so on and so forth.

Speaker 1: My guess is there's a lot of people here who are here as parents or grandparents. What could a parent do, assuming that you're not born with a particular mindset, but if your son or daughter has a fairly fixed mindset, what kinds of things can you do or say to encourage the building of a more flexible growth mindset?

Dan Lerner: That's kind of the million dollar question. Fortunately, there seems to be an answer. At least, research says there's an answer. So, let me share it with you. How do we praise our children when they do well? And that's where it all happens. If we praise our kids for doing well, for winning, then they will learn to value winning and winning only. If we praise them for being smart, then they'll want to show everyone that they are smart. If we praise them for being good looking, then that's what it's all about for them, but if we praise them for the things that they can control. Like you can't control winning. I mean, you can work hard, but you can't necessarily assume that there's no one out there better than you. You can't necessarily control how smart you are, but you can work hard.

When we praise them for the hard work that they do, when we praise them for doing something that they love, doing something that they're passionate about. We praise them for their values, for being a great teammate, then what they learn to do is strive to do more of that, and that's the way we end up getting better. I mean, there are lots of factors, but when it comes to improving our performance in anything it's about working hard. So, when we praise them for that, it's less about winning and it's more about, what can I do that will help improve my circumstances? And that's growth.

Speaker 1: You mention about working hard and there's this concept of deliberate practise out there that some people believe you're born with some fairly rare talent and then others,

like a Malcolm Gladwell, will say, "Really is all environment and so forth." Can you shed some light on where you stand? I mean, you've worked with a lot of high end performers. Where does the idea of practise versus kind of genetics or innate ability, how do the two mesh in? Especially for you, what have you seen?

Dan Lerner: I wish it were as simple as being able to say, "This is the formula." But in another way that's the beautiful thing about realising excellence or expertise, is that there's not just one way. There are elements that we all need to consider, one of which is clearly working really, really hard. Now, the idea of deliberate practise that Nick brings up and Malcolm Gladwell highlights in his book Outliers, is that there's a very, very specific way to practise so that you can improve. It involves having a mentor, it involves getting feedback, immediate feedback on a regular basis, setting very distinctive goals. So, it's not, "I'm going to play through this whole piece of music." "I'm going to play one measure over and over and over and I'm going to work on nothing but precision with my fingers." And that's it.

It's almost like forced evolution, the idea that I'm pushing myself past what I would be doing otherwise, but the idea that it's only that is too simple. For a while that's what people were believing, that anyone can achieve anything if they work hard. Challenge is if you're really looking forward to playing pro ball and you're five feet tall, the odds are slim that you're going to make it matter how hard you work. If you're really looking forward to being that great musician, you have to understand that there are various levels of talent that people have in a way that they're born with. Let's say again, a lot of it's physical. If you are pianist and you have particularly long fingers you might have an advantage. That's this thing about our upbringing.

If you are raised in a family of ... I mean, we're here in Iowa. If you're raised in a family of farmers and you're really interested in farming, then the odds are you have an advantage over someone else who's really interested in farming and lives in New York City. Because you're not getting those conversations every night at the dinner table, you're not get the hands-on experience. So, there are clearly advantages when it comes to environment, but regardless of anything else, that hard work is totally key. It's just not a syndrome. Yeah.

Speaker 1: I've heard people say, "I've been doing this jogging for five, six, ten years and yet I'm basically at a sticking point." And I think it's because they're doing the same thing rather than pushing. Dan, you use terms like happiness, optimism and so forth. In academia, these are fairly squishy terms, but you always, you always talk about the science behind these things and the research. So, if you could share a bit about what you've learned about the science behind some of these terms rather than that it's just an intuitive sense that you have.

Dan Lerner: We started studying happiness and I say we, clearly not including myself, back in the 1870s. When we look at the foundations of psychology we're studying the human mind. We were studying the human mind when it was dealing with issues, like stresses and anxieties and depression and other obstacles to wellbeing, but we also studied the human mind when it was thriving. What is it about certain people that do well, certain relationships that allow them to thrive? That was really the case for many, many years,

until really the World War II, when you had this wave of soldiers coming back, or not coming back tragically, but with post-traumatic stress disorder, and their families were dealing with it.

So, all the funding shifted to just being able to survive these incredibly challenging circumstances. Between 1960 and 1999, I believe it is, the ratio of studies on negatively going in psychology, I'm positive it was 21:1. You had 45,000 studies of depression. You had about 500 studies on joy. So, we didn't understand it. In '99 along comes Martin Seligman, who's father of positive psychology, and says, "Listen, we need to get back to studying what it means to thrive, what it means to live a life worth living. And if we're going to do that, we need to study positive emotions and positive relationships and all these other factors as carefully, with as much scientific integrity as we studied everything else, or else it will always be squishy." That's what we've really focused on doing for almost the last 20 years.

So, we have these researchers, these scientists at very prestigious universities, who are looking at positive emotions very distinctively. Let's take an example that we share often is, let's take a group of doctors with a least three years of medical experience and we'll give them 50 symptoms to diagnose. Now, one group is given the symptoms and they're allowed to just begin. The other group is given a bag of candy. They're made to laugh. Their [inaudible 00:23:49] did not allow to eat the candy because that would wreak havoc with the study, but they're given a bag of candy, they're made to be happy. In that study we found that those doctors diagnosed about 20% more accurately.

We've looked at that with college students. We've seen that college students at University of Maryland prime in the same way. Think of something that makes you happy for the next 30 seconds, better memory retention with foreign languages. Primed again. They test higher on assessments of creativity. So, we're finding that brain works very differently and we're able to look at it and find that being not primed or being primed or being primed with negative emotions, think about an unhappy memory and their performance drops even further. At this point we have so much research that we're building that we feel really secure that it's getting a little less squishy every day.

Speaker 1: That's one of the things that I do appreciate, is that so much of your work is based on research. You give examples and it's not just a few case studies, but larger numbers. You got interested in the undergraduate experiences. I look out there, I think we have some undergrads here, a few that are going to be undergrads, a few wish that they were back to undergrad years, but this is that four, five year period, late teens, early 20s, that has really gotten your attention. Can you talk a bit about why is this so important and what do you see involved as some of the essential issues in the undergraduate experience?

Dan Lerner: Let me start with the first question, which is why is it so important. For years, I worked with very high achieving folks in an array of fields. Basically the phone call was, "Hey, how are you doing? My name is X. I'm super successful and I'm really unhappy." We get to work with them and it was sort of by changing their routine, changing their habits when it came to what are they focusing on. Are they thinking about those things that they're grateful for in their lives for example. I mean, how are they tracking those things

that do make them happy? It's a much greater challenge when you're 35 and you're set in your ways and you've been successful.

When I get to work with college students, as I say to them, with no offence to using the term, but "I got you guys when you're young." Which means that you haven't formed the routines and habits that you're going to apply as firmly as a lot of my clients. So, I get to work with them and help them understand ways to integrate wellbeing into their path. Now, it's particularly important right now because what we're finding with college students is that it's becoming greater and greater challenge for them to thrive in school. We had four million college students who were starting school this year. And that 2015 Gallup Poll shows that 90% of them have said that they have felt overwhelming stress in the past year. 45% of them have said they felt "very sad" in the past year, and 31% of them have said that they've dealt with work debilitating depression in the last year.

Now, think about this. One of, if not the greatest accomplishment for many college students is getting into college, and yet they're suffering. If google surviving college, you get 90 million plus returns. If you google thriving in college you get about three percent of that, because people are just trying to survive at this point. So, what we're finding is that the barriers to wellbeing are growing and the opportunities for wellbeing are becoming increasingly challenging, but this is such a wonderful time of being able to form those habits, learning what they can do, learning what the resources are, learning how they can really have a great four years that we're lucky to be able to get them at this point.

Speaker 1: I know one of the things you talked about the undergraduate experience is that it gets so many damn decisions to make and so forth. Can you talk a bit more about just the kinds of things that come out, that are thrown at you, especially freshman year, which is kind of like the brand new part of the experience for most people?

Dan Lerner: Well, college is arguably the greatest change that any 18-year-old has experienced thus far in their life, not for all clearly, but for many. Let's think about it for a second. When you're in high school you know exactly what's going to happen for almost every moment of your day. You're going to wake up, maybe you'll hit the snooze bar a couple times, but you're going to wake up, you're going to go downstairs, your breakfast is probably going to be made and if it's not made you have like one choice, it's Cornflakes or it's whatever it is. You know where you're going to be first period, you know where you're going to be second period, you know where you're going after school, to practise or whatever it might be. Then basically you come home and you do it all over again the next day.

The day you leave for college all of that disappears. Your support system disappears. Your friends aren't necessarily there. Your folks aren't necessarily there. You don't know where you're going to be having breakfast, who you're going to be having breakfast with. You don't even know who you're going to be sleeping with that person at a college, and by that I mean your roommate by the way. So, let's have a wild, wild first night. So, everything changes and it's not just that you're not sure. It's that you have enormous array of choice. If you decide to have to go here for breakfast. Let's take a

different example. If you decide to take this class it's not like you're choosing between bio and AP bio. You're choosing between like 47 different classes.

If you think about majors, I think one school in the country last year had 251 majors. So, it's not just you're having to choose. It's all the ones you're leaving behind. The moment you choose a course, you've just left 50 others behind. So, when you get into that course, no matter how wonderful it is, those tough moments you're thinking, "Hey, maybe I should have taken that other course or that other course or that other course." So, all of these overwhelming changes happen and an increasing number now that schools offer more. As a result it's hard to choose, and when you do choose the choices you make, and this is what we're finding in the research, the choices you make you don't even enjoy as much, even when you do make them because in the back of your mind you're thinking, "I could've done something else."

Speaker 1: Let's stay with the undergraduate years for a second. You're a faculty member at New York University. Your course, The Science of Happiness, clearly attracts hundreds of students. I want to [inaudible 00:30:39] and read some of the comments that they make about you as an instructor. It really grabs at the heart, the impact that you have. As someone who's really committed to education, how do you prepare for teaching? What do you believe are the essentials of excellence in teaching?

Dan Lerner: That's a tough question. I think there are number of essentials that I bring up. First is clearly ... Well, I shouldn't say first. In no particular order, let me put it that way. Communication is totally key. How are you going to communicate an idea to a student, to an 18 to 24-year-old? Because you can take the greatest science in the world, the most groundbreaking, fascinating, for us, science in the world, and if it's delivered the wrong way, it'll bounce off them. They won't soak it in, they won't be able to apply it and that's a real challenge. I would say first and foremost is having responsible science, but then very, very ... Sure, following directly after is, how do we communicate this to them?

So, what we do in this course is we make sure that we focus on the 18 to 24-year-old experience in many, many ways. There's a joke that all psychological research is done on college sophomores, so why would it be applicable to anybody? And I'm like, "Yeah, I know, I have college students. It's applicable to everyone here." But we pulled out the research that talks about second heart attacks and optimism. We pulled out the research that involves divorce and relationships because when you're 18 or 19 or 20, you glaze over when someone starts talking about those things, they don't apply, but when you start talking about GPA. You start talking about social experiences in college and creativity, performance in sport and performance in music. When you start talking about engagement and passion and things that we know they're interested in, in part because we've asked them, then you can see those eyes light up, you can see them wanting to know more.

We also do assignments. We assign projects that are actionable. That is to say, they have their papers throughout the semester, they have their final, they have their project, but every week they have an experiential assignment. That is to say an empirically sound, scientifically sound assignment such as, "Go home and every night

take 10 minutes to write three things you're grateful for in a journal and why you're grateful for them." And at the end of the week when you've done this, write a one or two page paper on what your experience was. We have a different one every week, so they can go through other semester and explore some of these sound interventions that can really, really help them and when they feel change, there's nothing quite like that.

Speaker 1: I know your classes are really, really big. We're talking several hundred students at time. Can you share maybe one student's story with you that somehow they were really touched or impacted by being in that class and shared that with you.

Dan Lerner: How do you choose? There's some really wonderful stories. I had a student two semesters ago, who was incredibly gregarious young man. We chatted quite a bit. Before class, after class. Really interesting fellow, an interested fella. Towards the end semester, well the very last class this semester people come up and they thank us. We chat. It's a really wonderful kind of bittersweet moment because we know we're not going to see a lot of them again. And this fellow, we'll call him Joe, kind of stood out to the side. Some people do that, they wait, they want a moment, they want some quiet, they want a little interpersonal, more intimate conversation.

And he waited, he waited, he waited until the very end and then he walked over and I could see in this young man who had always been so joyous in a way, bouncy, there was something on his mind. He came over and said that he had been incredibly successful all throughout his young life, all throughout high school in musical theatre. His parents were both professional musicians and it was clear that this was the path that he was meant to go on. He got always got to lead in high school and he came to NYU specifically for that pursuit, but he realised after he'd been there that while he was doing it, and he was successful at it, it wasn't really bringing him the pleasure that it used to do. He felt like he was missing other things in his life. He was missing ... he had run track in high school, he was missing that movement.

He used to play guitar and he was missing that too because the demands were so heavy and he thought, "Maybe this is not necessarily the right path for me." So, what he had done in the middle of the semester is he had gotten back to running with the intramural team and he had picked up a guitar again and he decided just to step away, but the challenge to stepping away from musical theatre was Tony's parents because they had such high hopes for him and he had been incredibly worried about what they would think, what they would say, how they would handle it. He told me that he finally went to them and shared what was on his mind and really told them what was happening and that they completely embraced it and said, "Look, Joe, the most important thing for us is that you're happy, not what gets you there, but that you're happy."

He teared up a bit and so did I. The idea that that he could understand it and go to his folks and have this conversation and also bring them some evidence of talking about passions that we explored in class, talking about meaning that we explored in class, talking about purpose that we explored in class, was incredibly helpful. The last thing he said was, "I'm happier now than I had been in a long time." And that was one of the highlights of the last five years easy.

Speaker 1: My guess is so many of us have probably been in that situation where we were afraid we're going to disappoint someone by saying, "I don't want to do this." So, maybe it's a good lesson for all of us that if you're on the receiving end of that message, how important it is to say, "Hey, you're more important than that." That's really powerful. We have a lot of people here and I'm sure people want to ask questions and have a chance to hear from you. I want to ask one final question at this part and I'm going to go back and kind of end it the way I started it, which is with the family. You have a nine-year-old boy, Julian. If I was here with Julian, interviewing him and saying, "You've observed your dad. What have you learned from your dad that you think is most important?" What do you hope that Julian will say?

Dan Lerner: Gosh, that's tough one. I would hope that he would say what I would say about my parents, which is that no matter what he does I support him in it and I love him, win or lose, and that I tell him how proud I am of him for doing those things that are most important to him, those things that he loves. I think it's that unconditional support that I would hope he would say and it's certainly what I got from my folks.

Speaker 1: Did you know that high ability students can go from high school to a major research university after only two years of high school? Our programme is the only early entrance programme at a public research intensive institution accepting students from across the country and around the globe. Learn more about the Bucksbaum Early Entrance Academy at the Belin-Blank Centre at the University of Iowa College of Education, by visiting BelinBlank.org/academy.

I hope some day I get a chance to interview Julian because I've got a feeling he'll be far off from here. Okay. We're going to now go to the part where we give you a chance to ask Dan some questions. I'm sure some of the points he's made probably connects with you in a very personal way. This, Josh, with the microphone. We ask that you go to the microphone so we can all hear you and since we have so many people here, if we could sort of just keep it to one question per, so we might be able to get as many people as possible asking a question. If you're ready, just see Josh.

Meg: Hi, Dan. I have a question about early childhood and specifically the way that you're talking about wellbeing and happiness and success and that our culture socialises children to specialise early, and how can we make sense of that in terms of the scheduling and the diminished opportunities for play and exploration and failure within those contexts and do you see a relationship there? I'm really curious about your perspective.

Dan Lerner: Sure. I appreciate the question. What is your name, I'm sorry?

Meg: Meg.

Dan Lerner: Meg? Thank you Meg. I think that's such a pertinent question because there is ... We were having this conversation before about specialisation and it can be a real challenge. It's funny, it's the second conversation and not the first question I've gotten today about specialisation in early childhood. What I would say is that if a kid finds something that

they really love, then the forwards that I use, I take them from a colleague of mine, Angela Duckworth, is choose easy, work hard. I give a simple example of like LEGOs, if a kid loves LEGOs then help them play with LEGOs and challenge them a bit when it comes to LEGOs. I think a lot of parents will go, "Look, LEGOs are great, but you really need to learn how to speak French. LEGOs are great, but you really need to learn your math. LEGOs are great, but you know ... because what are you going to do with LEGOs?"

But instead of that saying, "Great, so let's get you some more LEGOs and hey, this is a picture of a building in Paris. It's called the Eiffel Tower." Or whatever their level is and say, "Let's do this together." And sort of challenge them to embrace that. So, if they find something they love, wonderful. If they don't and it's drawing and playing in the dirt and playing the playground and playing with friends and one is worried they don't have a specialisation, don't push them in a certain direction. What we said about passions, they'll come. They're doing what they're interested in. That idea of playing in the mud, who knows what that'll become? LEGOs may become architecture. They may not, but the fact is that we're supporting them to do something that they're really passionate about. I think that's totally key.

Now, then the question comes up if they do find something and they're super focused, like my little boy. He's at gymnastics 16 hours a week now. He's nine and he loves it, but I find that he became far better, far healthier dealing with failure for example, losing, when he had other things in his life. So, the fact that he was also playing baseball, that he was also singing, that he had other interests, he loved to read. It meant that if he didn't do as well at a tournament as he had hoped, well tomorrow's baseball game and Monday is an audition for an acting gig. So, he had other things that are important. The idea behind harmonious passion is that almost nobody, almost nobody has harmonious passion, the healthy passion, there's only one. They have multiples because that means there are other stuff happening and that's really, really important.

Roberto: Hi. My name's Roberto Benzo. I'm a PhD student here.

Dan Lerner: Nice to meet you.

Roberto: And I want to thank you for coming, first of all-

Dan Lerner: Thanks for having me.

Roberto: And thank you for the University of Iowa for making me feel at home for three and a half years. I'm not from here. I'm international, but one of the books that changed my life was a Happiness Advantage by Shawn Achor a while back ago. It started teaching me to be grateful for some of the things, but it wasn't until I read things like Mindfulness or Search Inside Yourself by Tan from Google, that kind of taught me to be forgiving to myself and accepting, which kind of facilitated a little bit of the happiness, and to be positive every day. My question is to you, are there any other factors that you believe can lead us to be more positive or to be happier?

Dan Lerner: That's a great question. Thank you Roberto. Appreciate that. Let me make a distinction here, which is a class is called The Science of Happiness, but as we tell the students, maybe the first or second class, it's not really about The Science of Happiness, but if we called it The Science of Wellbeing we'd have like 13 students. Happiness is one factor. Positive emotions are one factor. When it comes to wellbeing or flourishing or thriving, the idea of really living a life worth living, there are multiple factors. So, the way that Martin Seligman, University of Pennsylvania would ... His theory is called PERMA, P-E-R-M-A, which stands for positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning and achievement.

The idea is let's pretend each one is a bucket. They don't all have to be overflowing, but if you don't have at least a drop in each one, it's really hard to be thriving. So, let's say you do have great positive emotion, but you don't have much meaning in your life. It's hard to be thriving. Let's say you have great accomplishment or achievement, the A, but you have no one to share it with, the R, it's really hard to be thriving. So, the idea is we need to cultivate something in each bucket in order for us to really be deeply fulfilled in our lives. That being said, this is a theory. There are other factors and you mentioned mindfulness and I think that's incredibly important. The studies that are coming out of mindfulness are so strong because of how they can help us deal with stress, have greater positive emotion, cultivate better friendships, so on and so forth, that that's a tremendous factor.

The other thing that's important, I think for everyone here, everyone who's listening, is that there is no one way to thrive. So, I tell my students this and I'll tell you the same thing and it is the cheesiest line I use all semester and you will probably groan when you hear it, but I look at my students and I say, "We are all, you are all, beautiful little snowflakes." And they, as they should, groan, but the idea is relationships are incredibly important to you and emotions a little less. For you it's meaning and accomplishments a little less, for you ... and it's an infinite array. So, finding what works for you is integrity, but the idea is when you have these buckets and you can look to them, you have a better chance of being able to realise the fulfilling, thriving life.

Speaker 1: This way. Do you have a question?

Dan Lerner: Did you have a question?

Speaker 6: I do research on hearing loss and I've been very unhappy with all of the quality of life scales that people have been using for years so I developed a new questionnaire I call the meaning of life. I gave this to 200 people and did an analysis of what the primary factors were. The third and fourth factor were physical wellbeing and emotional wellbeing, which was probably predictable, but the two primary factors. First, the second factor was having friends to share problems and to share joys. That could be a partner, it could be a parent, I suppose, but having a relationship with somebody. And the primary factor for the meaning of life was to be able to look forward to the future. So, even if your hearing was getting worse or if you had other challenges, as long as you could think about next week and next year about having a positive feeling about that, that was one of the main factors that contributed to the meaning of life in my work.

Dan Lerner: That makes a tonne of sense. I'd love to see the work you're doing. Martin Seligman has been looking at exactly that, the idea of how do we think about the future and how does that affect our wellbeing. That's what he's been looking at for the last couple of years. Relationships, what we found in almost every measure is they are the number one factor when it comes to our ability to thrive, for exactly the reason you said, because if I'm having a really rough day I want to turn to someone, a friend, a parent, anyone, a colleague I feel close with and say, "I'm having a rough day." Or, "I bombed the test." Whatever it might be, and the stress is diminished, but we also want to be able to celebrate those good things, "I'm having a great day." And we want to be able to relive those experiences. So, relationships are essential. It's tough to say it's more important than anything else, but we find, in so many studies, that it's number one, but you are right on the cutting edge, because as we said, Seligman was looking at just that, which is looking into the future.

Lanaya: Hi. My name is Lanaya Ethington. I actually am a licenced psychologist. I work at the counselling centre with undergraduate students and I also teach a first year seminar in positive psychology.

Dan Lerner: Cool. We gotta talk.

Lanaya: My question is kind of two parts for both of those hats. One is, I see a lot of students in my work that feel pressure to be happy. So, there is that idea like, if I'm not happy, then I'm doing something wrong. And then connected to the research that shows like the quickest way to be not happy is to pursue being happy. The pursuit of meaning is the key and then happiness will usually come along with that. So, I'm wondering if you can speak a little to how you talk with undergraduates about that in your course, but then also that idea that being happy in and of itself can be a pressure and stress if you're not.

Dan Lerner: Right. I mean, there's so many books and most of them are not empirically sound, that say this, "You can be happy. We can all be happy. We should all be happy." That in itself is pressure. And let's just stop and think about the answer before, which is if we just think about those five factors, emotions, engagement, relationship, meaning and achievement, only 20% of that is positive emotion. So, helping them understand that there are other factors that can add to their wellbeing, that can add to their thriving, is essential. Now, meaning peaks are two times in life. The search for meaning peaks at the age of 18 and the age of 65.

Most people are surprised by that. They think, "What's going to happen later in life? I mean, 18-year-olds, they're not looking for meaning. Fact is, they aren't looking for meaning, because what does meaning really mean? Meaning, one definition, which we tend to use is, that I feel connected to the world around me. And that gets back to the idea of, how can I contribute, how can I give? So, you don't necessarily need to be happy when you're giving back, it can just be deeply meaningful. When we look at things we're engaged in, the idea of flow or being in the zone, the definition of it has no emotion. For people here who have ever lost track of time. They're reading a book, they're doing a hobby, they're running. They're doing something that they're super engaged in and all of a sudden they go, "Where did the time go?" They don't hear the phone go off or something like that. That's engagement.

[inaudible 00:50:34] the researcher that really started working on this said, "There are no emotions attached. When you lose track of time you're not happy, you're engaged in something that's really fascinating." So, when we think about meaning, connecting to something greater than ourselves, engagement, connecting something that is really gripping for us. We think about relationships, they don't have to be relationships where we're always happy. They can be relationships you find comforting or that you find safe. And you think about achievement, it's not always necessarily a happy thing either. I mean, look, we can look at failures in achievement to say, "I failed today. It's my chance to learn how to pick myself up." There are many, many other ways to go when it comes to happiness.

And back to the buckets idea, for some of us it's about positive emotion, but for many of us it's not. I think giving students ideas of other ways, A, the matrix of this is PERMA. And B, there are other ways that you can actually pursue, in a healthy, wellbeing. You don't find meaning unless you pursue it. So pursue meaning. Figure out which your strengths are via assessment that we can chat about later, and use those every day. Cultivate those relationships because by doing so your wellbeing will go up and all of those, including the healthy passion, we find, are linked directly to higher levels of positive emotion.

Nathan: My name is Nathan Meyer. I'm just a junior at [GNSO 00:52:07]. I've got a ways to go.

Dan Lerner: Just a junior.

Nathan: You talk about success a lot. So, I guess this one is short and sweet, but what's been your biggest success so far?

Dan Lerner: That's a good question. I remember you, Nathan. You've asked question to me in the past. They are always so good and so hard. The easy answer for me, my greatest success in life is my boy. There's no doubt about that and I don't think there's any way to recognise that until you have one. It doesn't have to be a boy, by the way, my child, but boys are particularly good. No. So, it's my child. There's no doubt about it. It's a remarkable thing to be able to share the world with someone and to help raise someone in a way, at least for me, that allows them to really explore their passions and their loves and their happiness and sort of learn to sit back.

It's been a huge learning experience too. It's not success because I've been always successful at it. It's because I've found myself going, "Man, that was not a good parenting moment. This is a great opportunity to learn. How do I do this?" So, I'm constantly learning, but even then it's a remarkable, remarkable thing. So, it would have to be him.

Fanny: Hey, my name is Fanny and I teach undergraduates and the thing that really stuck out with me is the thing you spoke of, that there are no ... There's tonnes of studies now that undergraduates now, more than ever, are more stressed out, not happy, not thriving and in the seven years that I've been an adjunct professor here, I can see a change just even in that time, mostly in anxiety I would say. Then you alluded to choice

being maybe one thing that is causing some stress for people, but are there other factors that you could say right now might be influencing this sort of decline in thriving that's happening right now?

Dan Lerner: Sure. I think there's so many. We could have a whole session on that and then part two. So, yeah, there are so many factors. The idea that we need to be something, whether it's need to be happy, as you brought up before, or need to be successful, or need to be so many other things, need to be the best, are factors that I think of have begun to weigh with increasing weight, with increasing challenge on students. So, as you said, the numbers are changing. In the past three years, I believe it's the past three years, the number of college students who reported anxiety has doubled. Why is that? Well, when I graduated from college, which wasn't that long ago, yeah, it's by the way. So, it was plenty of time ago.

When I graduated from college I remember one of my good friends said, "I want to be a millionaire by the time I'm 30." I thought, "Whoa, that's amazing." And I'm going to classical music, so it's never going to happen for me, but that's amazing. Then a couple years later I remember talking to some folks who ... 10 years yet later saying, "I want to be a millionaire by the time I'm 25." So, I tell a lot of my students, is that Taylor Swift and Mark Zuckerberg, like they ruined your life. Don't get me wrong. I'm fans of both of them, but what college students seem to find now is that if they are not millionaires, at least for many of them, not all of them. If they're not millionaires, if they're not super successful, if they're not the best by the time they're 23 or 22. Zuckerberg didn't go to college, so by the time they're 21, then they've already failed. That's a really challenging, that's an impossible thing to meet.

I think that's really become part of it, is the expectation that we need to be the best, expectation that we need to make the most, the expectation that's not always ... clearly, it's not intrinsically driven. It's from the culture around them, that's really bringing them down. So, that idea of pursuing something that you're passionate about that you're intrinsically motivated to be passionate about, I think has a profound effect on their ability to thrive. I'll give you sort of one quick example, it's the 2015 Gallup Poll that looked at graduates who had finished college between five and 10 years previous and were, by all measurements, thriving in their lives, personally, professionally, so on and so forth.

What were the factors in college that allowed them, they believed, allowed them to thrive now, five to 10 years after graduation? The number one answer was, "I had a professor who cared about me as a person." Number two answer was, "I had a mentor who shared my interests." It wasn't about the fact they were the best in college. It was about the idea that they were human beings who were pursuing things that they were deeply engaged by, that they might have even been passionate about. So, back to the question of positive emotions, is it about cultivating that or is it about ... And even back to question of mindset, that Nick asked, or is it about what you can do that you find engaging? What you can do that you look forward to growing in? Because by doing that you take the pressure off of having be the best and you take the pressure off of those measurements that are almost impossible to meet.

Ray: Thank you for all of this wonderful information. My name is Ray [Smieth 00:57:25]. I'm a child abuse prevention paediatrician working at the hospital here. One thing that I am observing and I believe that relationships are the core to happiness at every turn in our lives, starting from childhood on. What I am observing is that obviously digital media, all kinds of media, are taking over our lives from childhood to adulthood, including myself. People are going out to dinner, they're checking their cell phones, checking Google instead of talking to one another and even posting messages on Facebook to one another when they are just sitting together. But from childhood perspective what scares me is young people unfortunately are using digital media are more and more as babysitters, giving the cell phone to a two year old with a video game or whatever it may be.

So, I'm worried that the kids are going to forget to play normally out in the nature, outdoors etc. With some young people at least I am seeing that parent-child relationship is being impaired with digital intervention or interference. How can we turn this toward positive? Because it's here and it's not going anywhere. What can we do to use this digital medium to make people happier?

Dan Lerner: If I had the answer to that I'd be a rich man. That's a great question and you're asking one where the research is increasingly robust, but we're still needing to find out much, much more. When we look at studies of the effect of social media on parent-child relationships even. Sherry Turkle at MIT has looked at this quite a bit. It's really fascinating. Even something as simple as ... She did a study on dinner table conversation. If the phone is anywhere within sight, even if it's off, even if it's flipped upside down, if it's in sight then the depth of the conversation is altered because people are almost expecting, because we have almost like that addiction that I can grab it or I can google something rather than having a conversation.

So, Irresistible, which is the book by Adam, or it's Alton, I'm sorry, at NYU, that just came out. It's about social media and what the issues are that we're facing. I think that almost like traditional psychologies, what we've been looking at primarily is how do we deal with the issues that come up? How do we help the kids and the parents and everyone else who's in here, deal with the challenges to wellbeing that social media presents? What is next and what we're starting to look, and I have a couple colleagues who are just beginning to look at it, it is your question. How do we use these to promote wellbeing? And that's the other half of the equation.

We look at psychology as having focused on dealing with illness and challenge for many years and now positive psychology of the past 20 years looking at how to cultivate wellness. We almost have a similar arc when it comes to social media. We're looking at all the challenges, just trying to look at how to use it for wellbeing. So, I think that research is emerging, but it's out there and it's picking up speed.

Speaker 1: Great questions and interaction. This will be the last one.

Dan Lerner: I will stick around by the way, and I am happy to hang out and answer these questions. Please, come on up afterwards.

Speaker 11: Well, I feel a lot of pressure because of that, but I'll put it aside. I'm a professor here and I love my students and a lot of times I find that the thing that pulls them back is their own sense of shame. I know that sounds really weird. I found that shame is even more destructive than ... Like shame is just like the big joy killer or the big motivation killer. I just wanted to know, you mentioned a phrase barriers to wellbeing, and I would love to hear your thoughts on really common barriers to wellbeing, because I think this could help all of us.

Dan Lerner: Shame is huge and if people here are interested in shame, Brené Brown is remarkable researcher, who's written on shame and a great writer. So, have a look at her work. I'm so glad you asked that question because we've been talking a lot about wellbeing. We've been talking a lot about happiness, but how to cultivate that in our lives? The one thing we really haven't touched on is challenges, and it would be unfair to not bring those up. In our course we don't just talk about happiness. About 75% of our course is how to cultivate wellbeing, but about 25% of our course is how to deal with the challenges to wellbeing, because if you don't deal with those you're not being realistic. So, we have our classes on optimism and positive emotion and positive relationships and engagement and flow and meaning, we also have classes on stress. We have classes on cognitive behavioural therapy.

We have classes on mental health because we want to be very clear with students that 18 to 24 is peak time for onset mental illness and that 50% of people are going to deal with mental illness in some capacity in their lives. So, the idea of going to the mental wellness centre should be embraced. You are not the only one in the room. In fact, what we do really early on, maybe even the first class this semester, is we ask, "Who here has been stressed out at some point in college?" 90% of the hands raise, which is very similar what we find in studies, but it's not because I want to know. We have 475 students in there. I can't track them all. It's because I want them, when they raise their hand, to look around and realise, "Wow, I am not the only one." Matter of fact, the majority of people in here have felt stressed out.

When we asked who's felt anxious, 80% of hands go up. It's not for us. It's so they look around and go, "Oh wait a second, I'm not alone. I'm not the only one who feels anxious." So, the opportunities to address those are essential if we're going to have wellbeing. We can't ignore those. So, understanding how we can, in some cases with stress, how do you reframe stress? I'll give you a simple study that was done, I believe at Harvard, where students, who were about to take a test, were given a paragraph to read through and in one case the paragraph talked about their stress being nerves. So, I'm nervous about something. They were asked to say, "I am nervous about something." In the other case, very similar, but they just changed the word nerves to excitement, "I'm excited about something."

By reframing the stress, they ended up performing far better on the tests that followed. So, in some cases it's helping them simply reframe what's going on. We've all been anxious. We've all been stressed out. How we deal with it ends up dictating how resilient we are, how we react to these things. In the case of stress it can be something as simple as that. I think often having people talk about it or understand simply what the data is because what we teach is not prescriptive, it's descriptive. Once a student

knows that 90% of them are stressed, that 30% of them are going through work debilitating depression, they feel a little more comfortable, knowing they're not the only ones on campus.

There are all these barriers and there are ways to deal with them. When is it okay to go to your friends for stress or depression? When is it okay to go to your parents? What are some indicators that it's time for you to go see a professional? So, once they understand that, they at least have something to measure it by and know, "I got talk it out with my dad or my mom or it's time to go to a wellness centre." So, that's how we try to do it and that's what we do and this is not a skill for the book, but to be very clear, there are chapters that are about challenges to wellbeing, the barriers to wellbeing and we try to help students understand they're not alone, there are things they can do and absolutely they can move forward with those.

Speaker 1: Dan, thank you for being on The Window. Especially thank you for the uplifting messages and the work that you bring, but also your sincerity really comes through.

Dan Lerner: Thank you. Thank you for having me.

Speaker 1: Could you help me thank Dan Lerner?

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