

## Getting Curious with Jonathan Van Ness & Dr. Lori Santos

JVN [00:00:00] Welcome to "Getting Curious." I'm Jonathan Van Ness. And every week I sit down for a 40 minute conversation with a brilliant expert to learn all about something that makes me curious. On today's episode, I'm joined by the host of the "Happiness Lab" podcast and professor of psychology at Yale University, Dr. Lori Santos, where I ask her, "How can we become less grumpy nightmares"? Welcome to "Getting Curious." This is Jonathan Van Ness. I'm so excited to introduce this week's guest. Dr. Lori Santos. Lori, welcome.

LORI SANTOS [00:00:30] Thanks so much for having me on the show.

JVN [00:00:32] Is it OK if I call you Lori?

LORI SANTOS [00:00:34] Yes, of course. Of course.

JVN [00:00:35] OK. So I think you probably have one of the most interesting jobs ever. You are a professor at Yale.

LORI SANTOS [00:00:44] Mmhmm.

JVN [00:00:44] And you teach a course on?

LORI SANTOS [00:00:48] Happiness, how to be happy. The science of happiness.

JVN [00:00:52] The science of happiness, honey, I'm very curious about this. It's like how? The wider question is and you're the perfect person to answer is can we train our brains to be happier?

LORI SANTOS [00:01:05] Yes, the answer is definitely yes. That's what the science suggests. I think this is super important because sometimes we think that happiness is just built in. Right? Like you're just genetically going to be an optimistic person or not. And that's all there is. Or we think that happiness is about our circumstances. Right? Like you need to become rich and famous and, you know, get a yacht and then you'll be happy. But otherwise, you know, you're just out of luck. But what the data suggest is that we can control a lot of our happiness through our mindsets and through our behaviors.

JVN [00:01:34] So what are, when you say the data suggests? And where do we get said data?

LORI SANTOS [00:01:40] Yeah. Good. Like pull me out on my nerdy "my data suggest." Yeah. So-.

JVN [00:01:44] No, I didn't mean to call out, but you know what I mean. It's like-.

LORI SANTOS [00:01:47] No, no. Totally. Totally. Yeah. No, it's, it's tricky, right? Because like how do you take a scientific approach to happiness? And in some ways it feels like it should be more philosophy, like how can you do rigorous research on this? But most of the ways the studies go is that the researchers just go out and find happy people like you can find them. You might be one of their subjects JVN, you know, it's like.

JVN [00:02:07] Some days.

LORI SANTOS [00:02:08] Yeah. They find these happy folks and then they just kind of figure out what they do, you know, how do they behave, what jobs do they have and so on. Then you get-.

JVN [00:02:16] Lori, I'm so sorry. My cat, I thought she was going to be fucking quiet and like a good little angel cause she normally is but she's scratching the hell out of this hamper and I feel like.

LORI SANTOS [00:02:24] Pause, pause.

JVN [00:02:24] She's well, she's just-.

LORI SANTOS [00:02:27] Can I see her? I'm such a kitty fan. Aw, she's super cute.

JVN [00:02:28] Yes. Come here, Lady G. Or just be quiet. Ok. She's kind of, she will, she, she's right here, she's right here.

LORI SANTOS [00:02:36] Let's see. Hey kitty.

JVN [00:02:40] Can you see her?

LORI SANTOS [00:02:42] Yeah, she's like white, or yellow or something.

JVN [00:02:43] Yes, yes. She's like a, she's a rescue, but she looks like she was like, very expensive, honey. She's one of those flame point Siamese. Anyways, ok, but I think she's done making noise. I'm so sorry.

LORI SANTOS [00:02:53] OK, yeah, totally.

JVN [00:02:54] So anyway. Yes. So the data suggests?

LORI SANTOS [00:02:56] The data suggests. Yes. So what researchers do is they try to go out and they find happy people and then they just try to figure out what these happy people are doing differently. Like, do they behave different? Do they have different jobs like, and then once you get hints about what the happy people do, then the scientists get not so happy people. They make them do the stuff that the happy people were doing. And then they measure whether they get happier. And those measurements are kind of tricky. They're usually just self-report. I basically just ask you before and after, you know, how satisfied are you with your life? How much positive mood do you have during your day? And then you tell me and then I see if those things change over time.

JVN [00:03:30] So it's kind of how Brené Brown did her research a little bit.

LORI SANTOS [00:03:34] Exactly. Yeah. She's one of the many positive psychologists that use these tools. And what's great is that we, we had like almost three decades worth of data of scientists who've been doing this stuff. So we actually have lots of insights about the kinds of things that really do work for improving happiness.

JVN [00:03:48] Because not only are you a psychologist, but you're also a cognitive scientist.

LORI SANTOS [00:03:54] Yes, we like big terms in our field to make us sound important.

JVN [00:03:57] I love that term. So what I mean, what is the, break that down for us? Well, a cognitive scientist, honey.

LORI SANTOS [00:04:02] Yeah.

JVN [00:04:03] What does it mean?

LORI SANTOS [00:04:03] So cognition is just like how we think and how we make decisions and the way we do that. It's almost like folks who are trying to figure out like what's the computer program for how our mind works? And we try to do that scientifically. Right? We, like, literally do experiments and how people think. And this is super important because I think if we want to improve our well-being, we need to know more about the glitches of our mind. We need to know what parts of our mind and our habits are leading us astray, because that's the only way we're gonna get better. That's the only way we're going to improve things.

JVN [00:04:31] So when you study the, or when you study this and like happiness amongst people, have you noticed any differences amongst them, like a gender approach to happiness, like do more women typically seem to be more happy than men or also like by country and like culture?

LORI SANTOS [00:04:49] Yeah. Yeah. Not so many gender differences, actually. And that's true in general in cognitive science like you'd think there'd be lots of gender differences, but typically there's lots more like variance, lots more differences within gender than there is across gender. You know, some happy guys and some not so happy guys, some happy gals, not so happy gals and so on.

JVN [00:05:05] So there's not more happy women than happy men.

LORI SANTOS [00:05:08] Exactly. Exactly. But there are substantial differences across countries where you look at some Nordic countries, like in Scandinavia, and they're reporting way higher happiness levels than, say, in the U.S. right now. And you know, why that is kind of a big question. Part of it has to do a little bit with things like inequality and, you know, the structures of different countries. But a lot of it has to do with how those different places are behaving. So the Nordic folks do a lot of savoring, they're like really mindful in those kind of cold months. They have a ton more social connection and less loneliness than, say, the United States. And so there are differences in country to country happiness levels. But they seem to not just be that one country is inherently better. They're just like doing the right stuff for building up people's moods over time.

JVN [00:05:53] Is there like a list for, like the 10 saddest countries?

LORI SANTOS [00:05:59] You know, it might be kind of the ones you think, again, you know, horrible oppression, you know, a lot of poverty that doesn't help but I'll more focus on the happy ones, which are really again, places like, you know, Sweden and Denmark, even places like Costa Rica have big boosts in happiness because, again, they're kind of focusing on the stuff where that really works for building people's moods.

JVN [00:06:19] OK, so I don't know if it's because I'm in quarantine or, you know, what's going on. Well, you know, social isolation, like, you know, 'cause everyone is, but it's like, is there a possibility that the people who report on the happiness in the happier places, I'm being devil's advocate, I don't know why, honey. Is there, could there be like a cultural reason for why they would report, like, more happiness in places? Because, like, culturally, like you just like should or like is, like is there ever, is there ever like pressuring in the reporting or does that, is that not the point? 'Cause the point is like trying to get happier.

LORI SANTOS [00:06:49] Yeah. Well, I mean, that's actually something, I mean, we're nerdy scientists, so we worry a lot about our measures and not just with the country by country data, even just individually. Like if I ask you today, you know, Jonathan, how happy are you? Like, you

know, that could be affected by all kinds of things. Are you really giving me an accurate report that I can trust? The good news is that those nerdy scientists have gone out and they have tested. And what you find is that these self-reported happiness measures correlate with all this stuff you'd want them to correlate with. So they'd correlate with if I did some detailed textual analysis of all your social media posts and if you had a diary and I went through and checked, it would match that. It would match what your friends and family report about you. So if I did these detailed interviews of your family members and said, how's Jonathan feeling right now? They would match what you said. And even they, they match on to different neuroscientific measures and hormone measures and stuff. So it's funny because like when you, when you ask people these questions, it sounds like a kind of crappy BuzzFeed quiz, honestly, but actually they're real scientific instruments that are tapping into people's deeper senses of how life is going.

JVN [00:07:49] And really I mean because at the end of the day, like a study or like anything that's, like, science, is like you're measuring a bunch of, like you're measuring and you're, this is, you're just measuring, you're just measuring things that are more, they're not numbers like they can be more subjective. So it's like it just it's, yeah, it's just such an interesting field. OK, so, when it comes to happiness, we've, we once talked to this neuroscientist who I really like on "Getting Curious." And I was saying like, why is it that the negative experiences just stick with us so much more than the positive ones? It's like I'll have so, just loads of like loving, adoring comments and my brain is fixated on like the one person that's disapproving or like, you know, "You could have done a more sustainable choice on that" or like whatever and then I'm like, "You don't know me," and I'm so fucking hurt. Ah! You know? So why, why, why is that?

LORI SANTOS [00:08:41] Yeah. Well, that is, that is evolution's fault, honestly. Because, you know what evolution-

JVN [00:08:45] At least it's not mine.

LORI SANTOS [00:08:46] It's not your fault, yeah, it's just evolution's fault. And I'm totally with you. Actually, this morning I had a comment from somebody who said my voice was really dumb and, you know, I should just be like, "No, my voice isn't dumb, I'm a Yale professor" or like, you know, tons of people listening to my podcast. It's fine. But of course, that's like the one thing needling around like. But anyway, but, but the reason is because of evolution, right? We, over time, evolution wanted us to find the scary stuff, the tigers, the bad stuff out there. And so it's, it's willing to have minds that throw away all the good comments. Right? Because you don't need to worry about those. But those scary things, those things that could affect our success or, you know, our, our survival, those things stick around. And so our mind is prone to what's called a "negativity bias", whereas when there's negative things, we don't just notice them more. We suck on, you know, like hold on to them deeply and in a hard way.

JVN [00:09:33] Oh, my God. That's so it. Yeah, it's that, that, it's the, it's the amygdala, honey. She's sensing the threats.

LORI SANTOS [00:09:42] Exactly. Exactly. And, and it's useful, you know, if you're, you know, some hunter-gatherer worried about getting eaten by a tiger. You know, it sucks when you're, you know, a fashion designer who's getting the one bad comment about sustainable choices. But, you know, your mind can't tell the difference.

JVN [00:09:57] Oh, my God. Do you watch that show "Alone"?

LORI SANTOS [00:10:00] I haven't wanted it actually. I know.

JVN [00:10:03] They take 10 people, survivalists, and they only get to take 10 things like, you know, some floss, a bow and arrow or whatever, and they drop them in the middle, like Patagonia, Vancouver, like all these places. And whoever lasts the longest wins half a million dollars, and it's just a lot of that like, you know, reptilian survival brain. It just reminds me of that. And there was this one guy who was a happiness like he, well, he's a teacher and he's always saying like, you know, you got to choose your circumstance, you got to choose happiness. And he ended up leaving on like the third day, which I thought was kind of a lull. I was like so excited for him. And then he, like, ended up leaving really quickly. But so anyway. So the negativity bias, it was really to save us from wolves, but now it's driving us crazy.

LORI SANTOS [00:10:46] Yeah. And it's super, it emerges really early. Like there's some evidence from studies that look at really young babies. So 3-month-old babies, they show them a little puppet show where one character in the puppet show is nice and one is mean. And what they find is that babies, like, start paying more attention to the mean one. They discriminate against the mean one even before they-.

JVN [00:11:06] Wait, say that again.

LORI SANTOS [00:11:08] Yeah. So, babies who watch these puppet shows and they see one puppet who's nice and one puppet who's mean and they start avoiding the mean puppet even before they start seeking out the nice puppet. And so this negative, this negativity bias isn't just built in. It seems to emerge really early, like even poor little babies are falling prey to the negative stuff early on.

JVN [00:11:27] Like, it's like, they're like, I just can not risk this negative experience.

LORI SANTOS [00:11:32] Yeah, it's like, you have to tag the negative stuff. Even their brains are paying attention to the negative stuff, which sucks. And I think this is one of the reasons we need the science. Right? Is that we need tools to get around this stuff. You know, we're not in some, you know, on a loan or stuck worse in some place where you have to worry about tigers. You know? We're just dealing with negativity of like dumb comments and silly stuff. So if we had strategies to deal with that and accept it and roll with the punches, we'd probably be a lot happier in our modern day environments.

JVN [00:12:00] OK so sometimes when people say really like horrific stuff to me online, I think to myself, I'm like, OK, this is just the price you're paying for, like your dreams coming true and you're like, and that you want to use your voice still. And there's, like, consequences to that because it's a really big place and I have like a bigger platform now. So like the stuff I say has a, you know, it has like bigger ripples and stuff.

LORI SANTOS [00:12:22] Yeah.

JVN [00:12:23] But I worry about that a lot too. So it's like when I'm stuck in that or when any of us are stuck in, you know, that negative whatever. What are the tools?

LORI SANTOS [00:12:34] Yeah. So one of the tools is, is what folks in the kind of mindfulness literature call "acceptance." Right? Which is basically just that this idea that look, there's going to be bad comments out there, there's going to be negative stuff. There's gonna be worse than bad comments. You know, right now we're in the midst of this pandemic. There's bad stuff, but we have some control over how we react to that bad stuff. There's this, there's this parable called "The Second Arrow" that the Buddha talked about. And the stories that Buddha asked his disciples, you know, if you're walking down the street and someone hits you with an arrow, is that bad? And people say, yes, super bad. It's like, well if somebody hit you with a second arrow,

would that be worse? People like, yeah, they'd be worse to get hit with a second arrow. Then Buddha says the first arrow is all the bad stuff. The negative comments, you know, the stuff we can't control. That's out of our hands. But the second arrow, that's our reaction to it. That's if we get super upset. And, you know, we like, you know, like go on Twitter and give some hate and like are pissed off for like the whole day. And Buddha points out the second arrow is on us, like we get to control what our reaction is. And so that's where acceptance comes in. Acceptance is this practice of being like, huh, how do I, how does that kind of make me feel? It's making me tight in my chest, it's making me a little mad. Can I just sit with that and watch it kind of be there, let it go away and just not make it worse?

JVN [00:13:52] That's so good. So wait, oh my god, we're going to take a really quick break. No, I don't want to take a break up, I'm getting so many good things. OK. We're going to take a really quick break. We'll be right back with more "Getting Curious" after this. Welcome back to "Getting Curious," this is Jonathan Van Ness, we have Dr. Lori Santos, happiness professor, cognitive scientist, psychologist and professor extraordinaire. So what happened? Like you were-? Where are you from?

LORI SANTOS [00:14:21] I grew up in New Bedford, Massachusetts, which is the town in "Moby Dick." It's like a kind of a sort of working-class town in Massachusetts. Yeah.

JVN [00:14:30] So you're minding your own business, you like realize that you want to become like a cognitive scientist, like and psychologist, you know, and, and then you end up like, you know, you teach at Yale. It's like kind of a major school. Obvs. So it's like, how did you realize that you wanted to study this? And I guess and then also, how long have you been studying it? And then the third thing is because you've always taught like college age students, right?

LORI SANTOS [00:14:59] Yeah.

JVN [00:14:59] So what have you? What have you? Has there been a shift? Is there a change? What are like? Ok, so answer that and then I'll ask the rest of my 80,000 questions. Oh my god.

LORI SANTOS [00:15:08] OK. Perfect. Perfect. Yeah. So. So I've always been fascinated by human minds because human minds are really fascinating. Right? Like that's the seed of how we, like, fall in love and make bad habits and an understanding that has always been really cool. I got into the happiness work relatively recently, though, just in the last four years, and that started in my role at Yale. So I'm not just a professor where I teach students in the classroom. I became one of their heads of college, which means I'm kind of like a den mother to students. I live on campus with students and that meant I was seeing them like a little bit more in the trenches. You know, I'm eating with them in the dining hall and hanging out with them. And the happiness stuff started because I was just seeing this mental health crisis that everybody's talking about in the news up close and personal. Like so many of the students I was interacting with were depressed or stressed or just, like, seeming like, like mortgaging their future on all these things and kind of not paying attention to what was happening in the here and now. And so I just was really frustrated, knowing this is like a community that I cared about. And so the happiness work started because I wanted to teach them what to do to be better. I wanted to give them strategies that came from the science that could really help.

JVN [00:16:13] Just jumping in here quickly for a very important content warning. The following conversation for the next minute includes a discussion about depression, anxiety and suicide. If you or someone you know is struggling with mental health or suicidal thoughts, please seek help by reaching out to the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-8255. If you need to skip this part of the conversation, please move forward about a minute and a half. Thank you.

LORI SANTOS [00:16:43] And so, so that was kind of where it came from. And then kind of to get to your other question, you know, what is going on with the students today, like they're kind of messed up. Like they're just, I mean the rates of, the national rates of mental health crises are just staggering. So over 40 percent of college students right now report being too depressed to function most days. Almost 70 percent say that they're overwhelmingly anxious and more than 1 in 10 has seriously considered committing suicide in the last year, which is like awful. And those things are relatively new. And so, yeah, so there is, like, a big change happen-.

JVN [00:17:17] Yeah, 10 percent is a huge amount of people who have seriously contemplated suicide.

LORI SANTOS [00:17:23] Yeah. Like, I sometimes look out at my big classrooms of like a hundred students and in my brain, it's like, oh, like, well, that whole section might be really having some suicidal ideation right now, which is scary. And, and it raises this question of what, you know, what happened, like what are we doing wrong? Like where did this crisis come from?

JVN [00:17:39] Yeah, I was going to ask, do, like, what were those rates like 10 years ago? 20 years ago?

LORI SANTOS [00:17:44] Yeah, well, we know, we know for some of them and they're kind of just getting worse like so the worst one is depression. So that number has doubled just in the last nine years, which kind of puts into perspective what's going on. Like, you know, the, it's not like things have gotten so much less stigmatized in less than a decade, you know, so it really raises this question of what's, what's changed? Why is, why are we facing such a horrible crisis right now?

JVN [00:18:08] So acceptance is a key in helping with happiness. I know in, in my time of being a yoga teacher and in being just a big yogi, like, you know, "What you resist persists and what you accept flows." And I've experienced that in my life in, you know, so many ways. But it's, it's really frustrating because I still struggle with it like a lot. And I see ways that I struggle with it, like, a lot. So ok well actually. OK. That was one road that I want to go down. And I do want to go down that road, but I also want to go down this other road. So. OK. So obviously, we're going through a political time right now. And I just think that it's, so I'm obviously I think like a lot of people trying to, like, grapple with like, you know, Joe Biden, he is going to be our vice president or he is our, he is our nominee. And, you know, I did a tour, a comedy tour all through America and I, actually all over the world. But I did this thing where I would compare the United States to this incredible like artistic roller figure skating pairs team. And in this one performance, they do like a pretty shaky, wobbly short and they have two major crashes and falls. And I compare those to the election of Donald Trump and then basically everything that they did for the first two years of the administration. Then the same team comes back and does this incredible performance. And I compare that to our midterm election. And then I set it up to this whole thing of like the 2020 elections, like, who do we want to be? Do we want to be this like hardworking team that gets up after a fall and, like, does really well? Or do we want to, like, not train as much and like put our twistle in the first half of the program and like fall 27 times to be really sloppy like, who do we fucking want to be? So then in the middle of that, I would do this thing about like this, this, like I said, like we had the most diverse presidential candidates in history. And then I would say each one like one at a time and the crowd would just cheer and cheer and cheer and go crazy. And obviously, I think most people who come to my shows are like college-y, you know, 18 to like 35, you know, is the majority. But everyone comes, but I think that's a majority. I'm getting to a point, I swear to God. So when I get to Joe Biden, everyone would start booing. And it was like, I mean, sometimes and then some instances I'd be like, "Don't boo y'all. Like he was like marriage equality's like kind of the first mainstream voice, like, so like, yeah, I don't want him to win either necessarily the nomination. Like I'm for Warren, but like we can't boo for him, he's on our team." And now he won the fucking nomination, which I think is pretty shocking. But what I'm worried

about is there's so many young people who are so disillusioned and are so disappointed about it. But I also see a lot of content on Twitter and on Instagram that really is equating him with, like, a Trump. With, like, a he's a rapist, he's a this, he is like, you know, like. And while he does have sexual assault allegations against him and they sound really inappropriate and wrong and, but when, but when you're weighing, you know, what Donald Trump's ramifications of a Supreme Court justice are going to do and what all of his policies would do versus like a Biden team and what those would do for the most vulnerable people, especially young people. Student loans, healthcare, so many things that we care about. The environment. It's like I'm just concerned that young people won't be able to see the forest through the trees and will get disillusioned. And really it's like so much of this news is crazy making, it makes you unhappy.

LORI SANTOS [00:21:38] Yeah.

JVN [00:21:39] And really, the only way we can change it is to vote. But if people can't see the context. But to me it's like I'm not excited particularly. Again, I wanted Warren, but like, she's gonna be like all up in the financial bureau if he wins, you know, and Bernie's going to be able to push things super left, all of them are gonna be able to make it so much better than Trump together. I'm done talking. I'm sorry. That was like a five minute rant.

LORI SANTOS [00:21:59] Yeah, no, no, I'm also-.

JVN [00:22:01] But you're around these people all the time. And I'm worried about it.

LORI SANTOS [00:22:02] Yeah, no, I'm worried about it too, and I'm also Wa-, a Warren girl, too, so, you know, sharing the mourning with you.

JVN [00:22:08] You were?

LORI SANTOS [00:22:09] Yeah, yeah, yeah. But so, I think, a couple of threads there. One is, you know, I think this is the problem with a generation that's just so incredibly anxious. Right? It's because they are just prone to sort of see threats. I think the other part of this generation is that, you know, we were living a lot of our life online, which doesn't help with the things we do really well as a species, which is to, like, be empathic and to hear people's perspective and people's point of view. You know, when you're just getting these townies-, when you're just getting these tiny soundbites, you know, Biden is a sexual assaulter or something like that. It's, it's really hard to see the forest for the trees. And so I think what we need to do is to think of ways that we can harness the human mind to become more empathic, more perspective taking, in this new environment that we find ourselves in with, you know, 24 hour news cycle and things coming in and things being so tribal. The good news is that the psychology suggests that there are really good ways to do this. One of them is just convincing ourselves that we're actually good at this. There's some lovely work by Jamil Zaki, who's a professor at Stanford, who, who's been looking at what our own theories are of our own empathy, you know, are, are young people, you know, just really, you know, the kind of people who are just gonna get blindsided and say, you know, well, screw Biden, I'm not going to vote? Or are they the kind of people who, you know, can sort of rise to the occasion and say, you know, maybe there's a common enemy and we should all work together? His data and the others seem to suggest that our own theories of our own empathy and our own theories of our own tribalism kind of matter a lot. And so that's one of the reasons whenever I get to talk about this, I point out like, no, no, no, there's there's data that we really can increase our empathy over time. There's data that we really can decrease our tribalism over time, because then that gives us hope. You know, these, these kind of tiny, the, in some ways, the yucky stuff, the more tribal stuff, the more bad stuff is the thing that comes in our face in the news and our social media feeds all the time. But actually, if you look more, people are actually a lot more reasonable than the caricature that we put forward. And so we need to kind of believe that,



because I think the more we talk about that part, the better it's going to be in general, but especially the better it's gonna be in the election coming up too.

JVN [00:24:14] So in terms of Covid-19 and fucking election 2020.

LORI SANTOS [00:24:20] Yes.

JVN [00:24:21] Which you know, two fucking massive fucking public health emergencies and like, you know, crises like we have literally not seen in a long time. How could we all be happier, slash, like, help each other and make better decisions together?

LORI SANTOS [00:24:41] Yeah. It's a super, super important question. I think the first thing we need to do is have a little bit of self-compassion because I think that is super critical right now. I think, you know, we're not firing on all cylinders in the midst of this mess and we're feeling panicked and kind of scared and so on. I watched my college students fall prey to this. You know, so many of them send me like little screenshots of their insta stuff. And they're like everyone wants me to, like, you know, be starting a new fitness regimen or be perfect-perfect in the context of quarantining and like "Ahh". And it's like, no, don't, like, just, just do what you can do right now. So I think, like, that's kind of thing number one is just to validate that this sucks, that it's really scary, that are, it's unprecedentedly scary. And that means we just need to, like, give ourselves a little break every now and then. But kind of with that I think now is the time to double down on all the stuff that we know works for happiness. And that's things like taking time for social connection. That's not, you know, panic scrolling your Insta feed about the election or Covid-19. It's, you know, finding ways to use technology to, like, connect with your friends, like do a yoga class with a friend in New York. Like, I've been doing dinner with friends in different time zones. I've gotten together and done spa nights with my friends from college and we like, you know, do masks and do our hair and stuff. And it sounds super silly, but like those tiny little moments of savoring are what's going to keep us sane so that we can get through this stuff. The other thing is to double down on all our healthy habits. So things like exercise, meditation, you know, having a stable routine, like getting up and showering in the morning, like all the stuff that normally kind of keeps us sane and happy. Those things are going to be even more important during this kind of really, like, uncertain, crazy time of Covid-19.

JVN [00:26:22] Yeah. I mean, I know for me when I was really in the throes of, like, my depression and, like, really having just like my worst bouts, which like I was 25, 26. And, you know, there was a time I mean, my apartment was filthy. I, like, didn't open mail for like months and months and months at a time. Like, I was, like I had just contracted HIV. I was, like, in a bad way, like, I mean, I think in 2012, I think I made like ten thousand dollars. Like I was all, in all sorts of, like I mean, I was like, you know, couldn't afford apartments, like was moving around. It was, like, a really bad way. And it's like even just getting a routine that wasn't self-destructive felt impossible.

LORI SANTOS [00:27:06] Yeah.

JVN [00:27:07] And so it's like, you know, short of, you know, starting like, it's like doing what you can. It's like if someone is in the throes of depression or really having, like, a mental health crisis, like, where can someone start?

LORI SANTOS [00:27:22] Yeah, I think the babyest, tiniest of baby steps can be incredibly powerful. If one of the things you're experiencing right now is anxiety, which both on the election side and the fear about that. And on the Covid-19 side, many of us are feeling, like, I personally have to keep checking my temperature because I'm like I have such shortness of breath 'cause my chest is so tight. Like maybe I have Covid. It's like, no, I'm just, like, anxious. Like that's what anxiety does to your body, you know? But I think if you're in that state, a really easy-

JVN [00:27:53] Or you're an asymptomatic carrier because I have shortness of fucking breath too every time I like, like, I hauled this mattress up the stairs the other day and then I was out of breath and I was like I was like, I have it! And I was like, no, girl. You just carried a mattress and a box spring on your back up this flight of stairs. But then it's like maybe a year ago, I could have done that and not been breathed out. But yeah, that's the anxiety talking, isn't it?

LORI SANTOS [00:28:10] It totally is.

JVN [00:28:11] You probably don't have it, I don't probably you have it. You know, it's just the anxiety.

LORI SANTOS [00:28:14] And then we don't deal with that, right? Right? Because instead of being like, ok, we're just fine. It was just the mattress. It's like, well, let me check the symptoms online of Covid again and let me see how many people in New York have it. And then we spike our-

JVN [00:28:24] And then you sterilize my fucking counter again because I know that cardboard fucking touched that thing.

LORI SANTOS [00:28:30] Exactly.

JVN [00:28:30] No, I know it did, like last week and then on that cruise ship, it had been living in their cabins for three weeks. When they went back in, you know, in Japan, like back in February. So ok, ok.

LORI SANTOS [00:28:40] So all those things, all those things, basically what you're doing is you're spiking your body's sympathetic nervous system. So that's the fight or flight. Like, it's like your chest is beating and your muscles get tight. And the irony of that is that when you have higher sympathetic nervous activity, it actually screws with your immune system, it actually makes it more likely that you're gonna get sick. And so what we need to do, so, so the baby step, if people are feeling overwhelmed, is just take two minutes or one minute to stop the sympathetic nervous system. And basically the way you do that is just with deep breaths, like so everybody is like, oh, just take one, you know, one conscious breath. But like actually taking one conscious breath kicks in the other system, the parasympathetic nervous system. That's the rest and digest. That's the thing that promotes immune function and sexual health and lets you digest stuff. And we have-. There's not like a lot of ways we can control it, but there is one, which is that if you breathe deeply in your belly, you actually activate this thing called the "vagus nerve," which is the part that, is the nerve in our right, in our body that's like, hey, turn on the rest and digest because things are cool, like no tigers chasing you if you're really breathing deeply in your belly and taking a really long exhale. So like, cool, like, shut that off. And so, so that's my baby step for the people who are just like, you know, you can't get up and you're in the throes of that stuff you're going through in your 20s is like just right now, if you're listening to this, take a big, you know, deep in the belly and then super slow out and you can feel what that feels like after one. But if you do that for a minute, it will be really powerful. If you set a little timer to do that for a minute, you know, once an hour, it'll feel even better. And it doesn't just feel better. You're literally changing on which systems in your body you're on and off.

JVN [00:30:25] Every hour, I like that challenge. That's gorgeous.

LORI SANTOS [00:30:29] Or whenever you think about it, whenever you do, for me, I try to do it whenever I notice that I'm like, again, the, like, mattress up the stairs feeling where, like, my chest is really tight. That's cause I'm activating the wrong system. So just take a break.

JVN [00:30:41] Speaking of taking a break. We need to take a break. So what a gorgeous segue. Um, if you're driving, don't do like a minute of mindfulness. If you're in the middle of on the road, but you're probably not driving as much listening to the podcast now as you used to be. So maybe on this commercial break you could do a minute of mindfulness like Dr. Santos just suggested. And you know, we're gonna be right back with some commercials. Welcome back to "Getting Curious." This is Jonathan Van Ness. We welcome back Dr. Lori Santos. So I think that's a really powerful baby step. Mindfulness. And there is so much medical science behind the, the power of mindfulness for so many different ailments, which is, you know, really, you know, incredible. So. What are some of the other things that, well actually, no. Yes, but no. So you too host a very incredible podcast. That so many people listen to. And if you are listening to our podcast now and you have not listened to Dr. Lori Santos' podcast, you need to. Honey, it's called "The Happiness Lab." Gorgeous title.

LORI SANTOS [00:31:54] Thank you.

JVN [00:31:55] Yes. And congratulations on, just on the success of your podcast. And I just think it's such an incredibly important topic to talk more about because there's so much anxiety and depression. And so what is "The Happiness Lab" about? How did you start it? Tell us everything.

LORI SANTOS [00:32:15] Yeah. So "The Happiness Lab" is a whole podcast about what you can do to feel happier through science. And the basic premise is that the big problem is that our minds are lying to us about the things that make us happy. You know, we think we need to be working harder. We think we need to get all this money. We think we need to get all these accolades. My students think they need perfect grades. And it turns out that all those things are complete lies of the mind, as we say, like our mind is actively telling us the wrong stuff. And that's a problem because it means there's an opportunity cost, like we're not putting our effort into the stuff that really is going to work, that really is gonna make us happy. And so, yeah. Each episode just kind of goes through a different lie of the mind, a different spot where we're getting it wrong and ways that we can do better. So offer some straightforward practical tips that are useful generally, I think are especially useful in this time of COVID-19, slash, you know, the 2020 elections coming up. And we're all just kind of feeling even more anxious and uncertain than usual.

JVN [00:33:09] OK, so can we work through one of mine?

LORI SANTOS [00:33:13] Yeah, please. Let's do it.

JVN [00:33:15] OK. So, all right? Yesterday on Twitter, I was like, oh, well, a couple days ago on Twitter, when Senator Sanders dropped out of the presidential race, I basically said I was like, thank you so much for all of the work that you did and for pushing the party so left. And then I said to all of your supporters, I know how hard this day is for you, but I hope we can all come together basically. It was nice. But then I went off on some of the mean people in the replies. I couldn't help it. I was like, dip my toe in and then I couldn't help it. And I was just, you know. So basically, then I was like a little obsessive compulsive rechecking, but it was like I cut it off after like an hour. But it's like is the key to just never do that or it's like but sometimes when I do it, because like sometimes people say such cru-, because it's like, OK. Just diving back into the Biden-Trump of it all. I do think that he's someone who, like had two young sons die and like a cra-, or a tragic car accident and like maintain that, like public service like through that. And I do think at the end of the day, he has done some things that were not good. But I also think he's been an honest person and he's been someone who has, when he has messed up, I feel like he has taken responsibility for it, which I think and which everything with Anita Hill and everything with the 1994 prison stuff, it's like it's all fucked up. It's bad. Like it's bad. But I mean, but when I

think about Trump, it's like it's honest leadership with faults or snake oil. And it's like getting he, and it's to me, it's so clear that Trump is like really playing all of these kids with, with headlines and soundbites because, you know, on one side he calls Joe Biden "democratic socialist" and we can't ever have socialist. But then on the other side, he says that like that, like, he does like contradicting arguments that like confused people. And people will take things kind of like out of context from like my past or like things that have like, that really like, not that I didn't have fault in them, but just things that like don't really pertain here, and just will say really hateful, mean shit that doesn't help any of us get to a point, which is like the point is that we're trying to help people make sure that they have access to, more people have access to healthcare, which if we go with Biden, they will. If we go at Trump, they won't.

LORI SANTOS [00:35:32] Yeah, yeah. Yeah. I think I mean, lots of things here. One is, one is advice for you about how navigate those situations. Right? Which is, and I think it just gets back to mindfulness, which is that en masse, you just need to be paying attention to how this makes you feel. Right? You know, should you never do it again? Like maybe en masse, getting a couple of those good comments balances out the bad ones. But if what you notice is like, you know, your chest is tight and you're angry and you're like mean to your cat afterwards and like, it totally ruins your day, then that might be a time to, like, rethink your behavior.

JVN [00:36:01] I'm not mean to my cats, but my jaw does get tight. And I get, like, I just get really down and frustrated because it's hard, I feel like Twitter is a really hard place to really get through to people.

LORI SANTOS [00:36:13] Yeah. And then it's, then it's also I mean, I think that that's just true of so many of the technologies we use right now, like we are human primates that are meant to talk, not even like we're talking right now over Zoom, but like face-to-face where we see each other's expressions. We're not used to be doing 140 characters like that's just kind of weird for our species. And I think that there's a sense in which I mean, I get this too, like even when people comment on the podcast that they often don't realize that they're talking to a real human behind those comments. Right? And so sometimes if you just treat the people who are talking to you like a real human, like try to shut off the anger response and just try to connect with them, it can be incredibly powerful. And there been some examples of celebrities trying to do that where they like, you know, connect with the trolls and be like, what's going on with you like that you're so angry that you get this stuff? It doesn't always work, but it can be really powerful. Another thing that we can do, like, personally, but I think we need to promote across society is to find ways to be a little bit more empathic generally. And just like, as with other things, the science suggests there's some practices that we can do to do that. Like, it's almost like a superpower where you can kind of charge up your compassion, which, and then the data on that is like super powerful. It suggests that if you're feeling empathy, then you're like just kind of seeing all the suffering in the world and you're experiencing that suffering yourself. You know, like you're thinking about the people who can't get healthcare and you feel really awful. And that beats you down. That burns you out. But compassion is this emotion that allows us to turn on a caregiving response. It's like super action oriented. And all the, there's lots of science suggests we can build that up. One way is through meditation. It's through a special kind of meditation known as "Love and Kindness," where instead of just following your breath, you kind of give compassion to people. You think, "May this person be happy, may be safe and healthy." And you do that for easy people. Actually, people a lot start with their pets. So you can start with your cat like "May they be healthy and happy," but then you up the ante over your meditation and then you get to the hard people. You know, "May that jerk who I made the mean comment about over Internet. You know, like may he be happy, too," because, you know, whatever is going on with him, you know, he's just a human like me and he needs to be happy. And so those practices, it turns out-

JVN [00:38:22] That's so nice.

LORI SANTOS [00:38:24] I know it's sad. But the data-

JVN [00:38:25] No, it's nice.

LORI SANTOS [00:38:25] It's nice, OK. It's, it's like it's nice but it's also like neuroscientifically so interesting. Like, if you look at the brains of monks who do this, who do these compassionate meditations over time, they can look at videos of suffering, you know, like people who are going through awful things and they can titrate the amount of compassion they feel. So you can tell them a prompt like feel 50 percent of compassion for the sad people in his video or feel 10 percent of compassion. And if you look in their brain like the pain regions of their brain, they're like linearly titrated to that amount of compassion you want them to feel. And so the awesome thing about these practices is it's like a superpower. It's like if you need to turn it on and be like, say, you know. You're talking with, like, a young millennial liberal who probably would vote for Biden if they could kind of, you know, hear each other out and hear you out. Then you'll, like, turn out the compassion there and be like, OK, I just need to see things from their perspective a little bit more. Be a little bit more patient and then you get positive results versus like, you know, if you're dealing with. I know some, like, super bigoted Trump supporter who like hates LGBTQ people. Maybe you won't use the compassion there. Right? So you can kind of pick and choose how much you're using at any point, which is so powerful to be able to do that.

JVN [00:39:31] And basically, we do that by practicing "Love and Kindness" meditations?

LORI SANTOS [00:39:35] Yeah, there's, we have some on "The Happiness Lab" podcast. We have some at the end of our podcast, but you can get them anywhere. It's basically just a practice where you just sit there and think about the happiness of other people. So the prompt is usually, "May you be happy, may you be safe, may you be well," and just kind of scroll through different people in your life, you know, like your, your partner, like the barista at your coffee shop, that jerk on the Internet, the whole world, yourself. That's another good one, is that sometimes we don't, it's really hard to devote compassion to ourselves, especially in this tough time. But that can be a really powerful practice, too.

JVN [00:40:09] So then, especially like, you know, within this tough time of all this isolation and anger and frustration and stuff, it's like, how can, how do these things like relate to and how can we do more of these happiness building exercises during this COVID fucking crisis?

LORI SANTOS [00:40:29] Yeah, well, you, like all good things in life, it takes a little work. And so, you know, at a time when everything feels so overwhelming, that can be hard. But baby steps, you know, do that one minute breath or take two minutes to do a "Love and Kindness" meditation or next time you know you're really pissed off at somebody, just do it to that one person. That's kind of, you know, in the beginning of the podcast we talked about, you know, is: can you actually affect your happiness? Is it built in? It's not built in. You can, you can do something about it. But like doing something about all kinds of things is gonna take a little bit of work. The good news is it doesn't actually take that much time. Like, you know, a minute, two minutes, these practices can have a big effect. And the more you do them, the easier they become to do. They kind of can become habits in your life, which means the work that you put it now will be good saving work because you will have to put that work in in the future.

JVN [00:41:16] Ok so, but what if those things are like broccoli and you want cheese? Because like, you know, like-

LORI SANTOS [00:41:24] Yeah.

JVN [00:41:24] But you don't want to, you know, literally get addicted to like the cheese or the cake or the whatever, because like then your brain likes you because that's like addiction, that's not true joy.

LORI SANTOS [00:41:33] Yep.

JVN [00:41:33] And mommy, I love, like, addictions. I got 17 million of them. But how can we do like true our brains not lying to us like, you know, vagus nerve, not getting chased by tigers, like really, like, fulfilling? And if, in recovery, they would say like "Outer Circle." Like.

LORI SANTOS [00:41:52] Yeah.

JVN [00:41:52] How do we get some good Outer Circle activities?

LORI SANTOS [00:41:55] Yeah.

JVN [00:41:55] And especially like alone, like alone ones that maybe don't cost too much.

LORI SANTOS [00:41:59] Yeah. Well on the point of like you know that our mind lies to us that, I wish we could solve that one because it would make it every, every, it would make it so much easier if we only craved the broccolis in life and not the like cheesy cupcakes in life, whatever that metaphor like.

JVN [00:42:11] But isn't there a harm reduction? A little bit of a cheese for the broccoli? Isn't there like a reduced fat wasn't so bad for you, but like, isn't there like, isn't there like a, like a, like you, you could do like a, like a nice organic grass-fed cheese?

LORI SANTOS [00:42:24] Yeah. Yeah. Well the way it works is like, you mean, I'm not sure this food metaphor is gonna work. But, but the way it works is that through mindfulness and through these practices of noticing, you actually can start paying attention. Like wait, hang on. Like maybe the cheese kind of makes me feel bloated and whack afterwards. Whereas the broccoli gives me energy. And when, you know, I mean, again, the metaphor is not working. But the point is that like when we're, when we're doing these things that are good for us, say you're meditating or say you take that conscious breath afterwards, just take a moment to be like how'd that feel? Like how does my body feel right now? And then you notice it feels kind of good. And that can cause you to be more motivated to do it. And that's, that's critical to do, because this is another way our brains are so stupid, is that if you look at the neuroscience of how the brain works, we have different circuits in our brain for wanting and liking. So there's like one circuit of your brain that's the wanting part, that's like I crave the thing, let me go out and work for it. Let me go after it. And then there's a totally different circuit that likes that thing. When you finally get it, how enjoyable is it? And these things can, can, can split. Right? And so in addiction, if you've had addictions, you know, this works like if you're addicted to heroin and you really, really crave, you really, really want the drug. But then when you finally get it, you're habituated to it, it's not even that good anymore. And so I feel like this happens all the time with so many things like I really, really crave, you know, making a super mean comment to someone on Twitter and then going back and check, did they like it, you know, what did they say? Like, I crave that. But then my wanting system is like, what the hell are you doing? This feels awful. Like why did you make us do this? You know? And then there's the reverse. You know, like I don't, I don't have a craving. I don't have that system kicking in to be like, "Lori, you need to hit your yoga mat today or you're going to feel really crummy." Like no one, no, no part of my brain is craving that. But then when I finally do it, my wanting system is like, thank God. Thank God that you took time for yoga. Or like thank God you took time for this conscious breath. I feel so much better. Please do that again next time. But it doesn't, it doesn't click. So it's just a dumb feature in our brain.

JVN [00:44:15] I guess like that's like what I meant. Well, I think it's like, well, it's everyone's, it's not just yours. But it's like, I'll, like my therapist is really into me like sitting down and doing like a sit down for three minutes and do like three minutes of mindfulness every day. And then I'll be like, like one of my favorite things to say to her is like, girl, I, but I did fuckin like 40 minutes of yoga and I did Savasana for five minutes so I don't really want to have to go sit down three minutes outside of that because I already did it for 40 minutes and, but really part of my yoga practice is like wrapped up in like, you know, me wanting to sweat. And me wanting to workout. And me knowing that I get my little endorphin kick. So it's like and I do feel like the Savasana is mindfulness. Like it, I do feel like that. But I guess.

LORI SANTOS [00:44:54] If you do it. You can also just be like, "I'm going to bake this later today. And I have to send this email. And-"

JVN [00:44:57] No, I really, like I really will, like, lay there and like I, like, for a good, like, three minutes, like I always have like it's like rain music. So it's like not English words. And I really do just like, listen to my inhales and exhales and some times I'll, like, do a guided one in my head of, like, feel my head sinking into the floor and then feel my neck or I'll be like, relax my tongue, relax my tongue, relax my brow, relax my brow. Like, I'll do it like through my body like that. But the point is, I feel like that's what I meant, like that'll be like that cheese to my broccoli, like if the broccoli is just sitting there without getting to do something a little bit, like it's just fun to move a little bit. But I'm like, in recovery, they like we would talk about like Outer Circle or just things that are, like, really good for you that, like, aren't destructive. They aren't bad. Like you can afford it. It's like, it, like, usually is associated like making your inner child feel, you know, more free. So like to me, like kind of cooking is like an Outer Circle thing for me. Like I, like it's kind of fun for me. I can afford it, I haven't gotten to do it for a long time. So it's like tumbling is like another one. But I just didn't know if you had any, like, recommendations on like, I think yoga is definitely one.

LORI SANTOS [00:45:58] Yeah, I think it's honestly it's like it can be like if you're mindful and you pay attention to what you really dig, you can find those. But I think you, you need to pay attention because otherwise you get it wrong. Like we do this with leisure where it's like, you know, I finally get a break and it's like, oh, my God, I was gonna plop down to watch crappy TV. It's like that actually feels gross if you notice how it feels in your body sometimes. But then you're like, actually, you know, cooking or doing something new or chatting with a friend or doing some yoga like those feel good. And so the key is that the Outer Circle, you're only going to find those things in the Outer Circle if you're really mindful, if you're kind of paying attention. But once you find them like double down, because those are the things even in baby steps of doubling down, that's what's going to make all the difference in this crazy time.

JVN [00:46:40] So at the end of "Getting Curious," I always ask, like, you know, it's like the little like Yogi, Yogini recess, like what do we talk-, or what do we not talk about that we needed to hit, honey? Like you really wanted to do you like [Yoga Pose] and I just, like, was not teaching it today. So this is like the three minutes where, like, we could talk about whatever. Like what did we miss? What did I need to, like misconceptions on happiness or like what, what, what do we need talk about?

LORI SANTOS [00:47:04] I think you did a good job, which is awesome because we went all over the place. I think if, if I was going to end with one final thought, it would be that even in the worst of times and I put this as pretty up there in the worst of times, honestly, like there are strategies you can use to feel better even when you're feeling super overwhelmed, even when it feels like you can't get out of bed, even if you feel like you're in the worst possible spot. There are active things you can do and they're not platitudes, they're evidence based things that neuroscience and modern day research confirm will make you feel better. And that should be really empowering.

That should be really empowering because it means at our worst points, we can take control. And I think that's a message that we all need to hear right now in the midst of this Covid-19 craziness.

JVN [00:47:47] Dr. Lori Santos, thank you so much for your time. We appreciate you so much. Thanks for coming on "Getting Curious."

LORI SANTOS [00:47:53] Thanks for having me, it's been a blast.

JVN [00:47:54] You've been listening to "Getting Curious" with me, Jonathan Van Ness. My guest this week was Dr. Lori Santos. You'll find links to her work in the episode description of whatever you're listening to the show on. Our theme music is "Freak" by Quin. And thank you so much to her for letting us use it. If you enjoyed our show, introduce a friend and show them how to subscribe, honey. Follow us on Instagram and Twitter at CuriousWithJVN. Our socials are run and curated by Emily Bossak. "Getting Curious" is produced by me, Julie Carrillo, Emily Bossak, Rae Ellis, Chelsea Jacobson and Colin Anderson.