

Gasthörer – der Wissenschaftspodcast der Uni Regensburg

#4: Shiny happy people? The science of well-being with Prof. Lea Cassar

Katharina Herkommer: Hello, how are you? In many English-speaking countries, this is not really a question but a greeting. Fine or good thank you are the only correct ways to answer. Just imagine you are standing at the supermarket checkout and the person in front of you doesn't know that and starts telling his or her complete life story. We are supposed to be fine, and others don't want to hear otherwise. At least for many years, this has been one of the big mantras of our society. But: Things have changed or are changing right now, and there are many good reasons why we should care about our well-being and the well-being of others. Not just humane reasons, but also scientific ones. And that's our topic for today, the science of well-being. My guest is Professor Lea Cassar, welcome to you.

Lea Cassar: Hello, Katharina.

Katharina Herkommer: And also a warm welcome to all of you out there in front of your speakers or behind your earplugs. You are listening to Gasthörer, the University of Regensburg's science podcast. My name is Katharina Herkommer, thank you for being with us.

Titel: Gasthörer

Katharina Herkommer: welcome again, Lea, great to have you here. First of all, how are you?

Lea Cassar: Good question. Do you want the short answer or the long answer? Let's say that I'm fine. Overall, I'm doing very well, thank you. Very happy to be here.

Katharina Herkommer: As you have noticed, dear listeners, we are doing this episode in English. That's because Lea is Italian, and our conversation is easiest this way. We hope all of you German speakers are following us just fine. Lea, I just said you are Italian. You were born in Rome, and you studied business administration and economics there. Afterwards, you did your master's degree in Oxford and went to Zurich for a PhD position. And in 2019, you arrived here at the University of Regensburg, where you are holding the chair of empirical economics. One of your research topics, as well as one of the courses you are giving, is called The Science of Well-Being. Before we talk about what you are teaching there and why you are doing this, let's start with the basic question. And in this case, I think it's not an easy one at all. What is well-being? Is there a general definition? And is well-being the same as happiness?

Lea Cassar: That's indeed a very good question. I would say that well-being can be interpreted as the scientific term for happiness, which otherwise would sound a little bit too fuzzy. And I would say that it consists of two parts, based on the psychology literature. One part has to do with the cognitive evaluation of your life, and the second part has more to do with the affective evaluation of your life, namely your positive and negative emotions. So it has a rational cognitive part and an emotional part. And you know, these two parts, sometimes they are not always

aligned. You can be rationally or cognitively very satisfied with your life, but in fact, experience a lot of negative emotions throughout your life. And so I think when we talk about well-being, both parts have to be measured and taken into account as two separate components.

Katharina Herkommer: Let's see if I understood correctly. So if you want to measure happiness, you put it into two different parts. And in the cognitive part, you think about: Is that good? Is this good? Is that good? And in the emotional part, you answer questions or you ask yourself questions about, how did I feel then?

Lea Cassar: That's right. So the typical first question about the cognitive part would be, how satisfied are you with your life? And then you know you can have subparts with, how satisfied are you with your job? How satisfied are you with your family? So different, let's say, categories. And then the emotional part, then you would ask, how often in the last two weeks did you feel anxious, stressed, joyful, et cetera?

Katharina Herkommer: It sounds like a science you have to fill in questionnaires, but still happiness is a very personal thing. So how come something personal like happiness is - with you now - settled within a university?

Lea Cassar: That's a very good question. And I would say it's an open question, in fact, that I plan to study in my future research, namely: Who is responsible for people's happiness? It's not obvious to answer this question. Is the individual, him or herself, the only responsible person for his or her happiness, or is it the topic that, you know, society in general and its institutions, and so obviously, education organizations, like from school to university, should they also be involved? And many people think

that education has the main purpose of preparing people for their job, for their profession. In other words, thanks to education, you learn all the technical skills that you will need to perform well in a job. But I think this view of seeing education just as preparation for a profession or a job is a very limited view. I think education should be about preparation for life. And I think that understanding how our mind works, how we can influence our well-being, understanding on what things we should invest our energy and our time on, or even how to regulate our emotions, are crucial in order to have a fulfilling life. So this is why I think it is very important that education should also consider preparing people to take care of their well-being. I would even say that even if you have a very narrow view of what the goal of education is, even if you really think it's only about preparing you for a job, whether you perform well into a job goes far beyond how much scientific or technical knowledge you have. Typically, in many jobs, you also need to interact with other people. So you need to get along well with customers, with other employees, with co-workers, with your boss, and, you know, if you are a very unhappy person, or if you're a person who cannot regulate his or her own emotions, you're going to have problems. Not to mention also jobs that need a lot of resilience or to see things positive, to be creative. I think that even for this setting, being happy, it's very important and can influence the outcome. So I would say that even if you don't share the high, perhaps extreme view of what the role of education is, you should see the benefit in, you know, sustaining the young people in flourishing in their own life.

Katharina Herkommer: That sounds as if there's a story behind it. You have come to the topic of well-being at some point in your life. What's your story? What's your personal connection to the topic?

Lea Cassar: Yes, you guessed right. I became interested in this topic after the end of my PhD in 2015. Let's say I had at the beginning a very hard

PhD, which then turned out at the end very well. So, I had a very successful job market and a lot of job offers. And, you know, I worked very hard for it, six years of uncertainty and struggle. The outcome was beyond what I expected. So, you know, on paper, based on society's values or also on the implicit value of the university, that you need to succeed a very high grade, et cetera, I was a very successful one. But I wasn't as fulfilled as I expected to be. After all these years of hard work, I was expecting a bigger increase in happiness, a longer lasting increase in happiness. Of course, it reduces some stress out of my shoulder, but I realized: No, that's not it. It is not professional success and achievement that will bring my deep happiness. And, you know, that may sound to some people perhaps obvious or superficial, but I think one thing is saying it and one thing is really experiencing it.

Katharina Herkommer: But I don't think that sounds superficial at all. I think many of us have experienced exactly that, that we are running after some goal, we are working really hard, we are working towards something, and then you've achieved it, and you know you should feel happy, you should be proud of yourself, and there's just this big hole. At least I've experienced that, and I know many of my friends have, so I'm really with you there. What did you do then in that moment? What was your solution for yourself?

Lea Cassar: Well, at that point, I decided to look somewhere else for my happiness and not in achievement. I read books about stoicism or eastern philosophy or religion. I started to practice intensive yoga, I mean, in particular, hatha yoga. Yeah, and I started to do a lot of walks in nature. So I started to change my life and I set my priorities in a different way.

Katharina Herkommer: And did that work out for you? Yes, that was a big life change. It was the beginning of a journey, which of course I'm still on, and that convinced me that, you know, maybe other people could benefit from learning what I learned. And this is basically the reason why I decided to bring this to the university.

Katharina Herkommer: You say you want to bring that into university as a multiplying person. How do you do that? How do you bring your life changes into the scientific world?

Lea Cassar: Yeah, that was a question that occupied my mind for quite some years. It wasn't obvious at all. I mean, I'm part of the economics department. So it's not that I can start just, you know, rambling about yoga or my spiritual slash philosophical path. But I didn't know how to go about it for several years. And that's when I stumbled on Laurie Santos' amazing course on The Science of Well-Being. And there I thought, yes, that's a great starting point. What is so great about Laurie Santos' course is that she combined all this wisdom, ancient and non-ancient wisdom, into scientific language. And so basically, suddenly, I cannot only tell you, you know, you should practice gratitude because that will make you happy, because I, Lea, experienced that by being grateful, I'm happier, but I can give you scientific evidence for it. So there is a scientific study that shows that people who practice gratitude, they have a higher well-being. And so, you know, I can strengthen my argument with scientific evidence.

Katharina Herkommer: You just said you came across the courses of Laurie Santos. For those of you at home who maybe haven't heard of Laurie Santos, my colleague Jan Kleine has a bit of information for us.

Jan Kleine: Laurie Santos is a professor for psychology and a cognitive scientist at Yale University in the United States. She and her research have been extremely popular for almost two decades now. In the year 2007, she was declared one of the year's brilliant ten by the US magazine Popular Science, and in 2013, the Time Magazine called her one of the year's leading campus celebrities. In 2018, she gave a course called Psychology and the Good Life for the first time at Yale University. It has become Yale's most popular course of all times. Every fourth student has taken part in it. Laurie Santos was born in Massachusetts in 1975. After school, she went to Harvard University to study psychology and biology, and early on had a focus on cognition, brain and behaviour. Her course, Psychology and the Good Life, addresses questions like what actually makes us happy and what can we do to achieve the good life. Due to its popularity, Yale made the course available online on a learning platform under the name of The Science of Well-Being. According to the university, more than 170,000 people from at least 170 countries have so far enrolled in the course. Besides her career at Yale University, Laurie Santos is a sought-after speaker for TED Talks and other keynotes. She has won several prizes. Her work has been published in many of the big American newspapers, and since 2019, she has her own podcast: The Happiness Lab. It has been in the American podcast charts for months, peaking at third place. Fiona Sturges wrote in the Financial Times: "Santos is the voice of sanity, not to mention scrupulous research."

Katharina Herkommer: So Lea, you found out about Laurie Santos' work. Did you actually do her online courses?

Lea Cassar: Yes, I did. I did her Coursera course.

Katharina Herkommer: Coursera is the platform where the course is online.

Lea Cassar: That's right. And then I contacted her and asked her whether by any chance she would be willing to share some of her material with me. And then she was kind enough to send me all the videos of her course from 2018 in order for me to write or prepare an economics version of her course, because Laurie Santos is a psychologist, well, I'm an economist. And so she was tremendously helpful.

Katharina Herkommer: If we talk about science, we talk about data. And you said before that you can actually measure well-being. But is this level of happiness, I just call it, is that fixed? So if I am a 70 percent happy person, will I be like that my whole life? Or what does determine this number?

Lea Cassar: Well, that's a crucial point. I mean, one question that one may rightly ask is: Can we influence happiness at all? Because why are you doing a course on the science of well-being if our happiness is just predetermined by our genetics? And so then, of course, in that case, perhaps a course wouldn't be much helpful. So perhaps the fact that I have a course is already gives you an answer. But of course, genes are very important. The current state of research, you would expect a little bit more than 30% at least to be determined by genes. Before, it used to be thought to be 50%, but more recent study would say around 33 to 37%.

Katharina Herkommer: So less determination.

Lea Cassar: Less, but still not so irrelevant. I mean, if you think, it's more than a third is genetic, so we should not forget that. However, the more interesting question is: How about the other 70%? And that's basically what the course is about.

Katharina Herkommer: And what are you teaching there?

Lea Cassar: Well, the first thing I teach is that what we think the rest of the 70% is, is not what it is. So basically, the first thing I teach you is: You're wrong. People tend to attribute what's on happiness, a lot of events or life circumstances, including, you know, income, education, especially income or wealth. But in fact, these are estimated to count about 10%. I'm not saying that they are totally irrelevant. I'm just saying that they count less than what we think. And then I talk about why we cannot really predict that. Why do we get it wrong? And finally, I teach, okay, so, but what is that really makes us happy?

Katharina Herkommer: You say income or prestige or so might not be the points that make us that happy. Why do we think the wrong things make us happy? Do we know that? How come?

Lea Cassar: Well, according to the psychology and economics literature, I would say there are three reasons why we get it wrong. The first reason is hedonic adaptation. We just get adapted to things. So we just get the new fancy car and we are happy for two days. If you're lucky, maybe two months, but then you just adapt to it. You take for granted. This does not only hold for the car, but it also holds for professional achievement, but it also holds for family and it also holds for kids. It doesn't hold for everything. So there are actually things people do not adapt to, at least not perfectly. And one would be, for example, unemployment. So that's

very important. Or strong physical disability. But yeah, we typically adapt to most of the things.

Katharina Herkommer: I completely agree. I love going camping. And whenever I've been camping for two or three weeks and I come home and there's electricity, a light switch is really very nice. And normally you just use the light switch and never think about it. So it's very good to get out of the adaptation from time to time.

Lea Cassar: Absolutely. That's actually, in fact, some of the recommendation that you get from all the scientific studies that, you know, sometimes it's good to have some little tricks to stop your adaptation so that you can enjoy and appreciate the things again.

Katharina Herkommer: What's the second point?

Lea Cassar: The second point is impact bias, which is basically, we don't realize that we have adaptation. So we tend to overestimate the importance that certain facts will have on our life. And this is caused by two things, in particular, what is called focalism and immune neglect. So what is focalism? For example, I don't know, I get a bad grade. I'm upset about it. If I ask you before, how upset do you think you will be about your bad grade? I'm going to tell you, oh, I'm going to be terribly upset. And you know, you stress so much about getting this good grade in the exam. But then it turns out that actually, this is even studies have shown that, that after a few days that you got your bad grades, you're not doing that bad as you thought. And one reason is focalism, because when you're thinking about the grades, you forget the other part of your life. You only focalize on the grades. And so you think it's going to be terrible. But so maybe yes, you got a bad grades, but then, you know, the girl you really

wanted to date since a long time suddenly say yes, and you go out for a date, or I don't know, your father brings you to a nice walking tour, or you do a nice activity with family, and suddenly you feel good. And so the grade is not so important. So sometimes we get obsessed or fixated on things, and we forget all the rest. And the second reason for impact bias is what is called immune neglect. In fact, we, how can I put it simply, our mind is very good in triggering us, and sometimes it triggers us in the right way, in the sense that we are making up stories about our life. A good example would be the story of La Fontaine, you know, the fox that cannot get to the grapes, and then said, oh, maybe the grapes wasn't that good after all. Some people could say, well, the fox is deceiving itself, but some people would say, well, it's actually healthy, because, you know, the fox cannot get to the grape, and so maybe it's good to just tell, well, you know, I can live without it, maybe it wasn't that good. And so we have somehow this immune system within us that can protect us. But the thing is, most of us do not know that they have it, and it's not the same for everybody. So some people have it much stronger, and some people have it less, but we can work on this. This is actually part of the course, is to learn how to tell a different story about yourself. For example, we think like, oh no, I'm never going to survive not having the career that I really wanted to. And then when you actually are in this situation, your mind can work in your favour and make you look at things differently and say, well, you know, I would have stressed so much but in this career now I can focus much more on the kids. And then you can realize that your life is better than it would have been otherwise.

Katharina Herkommer: You are giving us the course in 10 minutes right now that normally lasts a semester. Is there a third point still? Why we think things make us happy but don't?

Lea Cassar: That's right. So the third reason for why we get it wrong, it's called reference point. Basically, we value things and events in our life compared to an irrelevant and often wrong reference point. For example, I'm going to value my income based on the income of other people. So not from the consumption value of my income, what can I buy for it, but what can I buy compared to other people? In principle, that's irrelevant. I mean, why should the expenses or how much income my neighbour has influence my happiness? Sometimes it's even wrong. I mean, now with the social media, everybody is posting their amazing lives and, you know, they only post the beautiful part. Of course, nobody posts the boring part or the miserable part. And so you compare yourself about this artificial image of other people and you feel like, oh, well, I should be as happy. And so that's why you become miserable because, yeah, you just basically compare yourself to irrelevant and often wrong reference point.

Katharina Herkommer: So now you've talked about many things that we think make us happy but don't. Which are the things that make us happy? Can you say that in general as well?

Lea Cassar: Yes, in three categories, I would say. right values and priorities, right attitude, and good habits. The right values and priorities, for example, is, you know, looking for a job that doesn't maximize my income, but perhaps that gives me meaning. Because we don't adapt to meaning while we probably adapt to income. Also, right values invest time in your social connection, and not only, you know, in your ambitious professional achievement, but spend time as much as you can with family and friends. That's very important. Right attitude is how to interpret your life, or to learn how to appreciate what you have. So again, you tell yourself a different story about your life. You start to be grateful for what you have. And also you realize the impermanence of life. Realizing that you're here today, you don't know if you're here tomorrow. And this

makes you appreciate the thing you have much more. It also sets the priorities straight. And third, the good habits, a lot of exercise and a lot of sleeping.

Katharina Herkommer: That sounds very logical. I mean, do nice things, be together with good people, do sports, sleep. Do you really have to tell students to do that? I mean, I think many of them are having a good time in their studies already anyway, aren't they?

Lea Cassar: You would be surprised actually to learn that many students almost seem to ask my permission to go to parties or to spend time with friends. Some of them, you know, were so grateful to me because I gave them as a task for one week: Oh, just go out with friends. And they were like, oh, thank you so much, Lea, because it has been months since I allowed myself a free evening with friends because I had so much to study. So no, I would say that overall you have to push the students also to sleep longer. They don't realize the importance of sleeping. They go to sleep late. They have bad habits, spend so much time on social media. So I really try to convince them that it's not healthy.

Katharina Herkommer: You say you gave them the task to go out with their friends. And that's one special thing about your course. It's not only a lecture, but it's also the tutorials where you are working together with the students. And the special thing is that you yourself are working together with the students and you're not letting some assistants do it. Why do you have those and what are you doing there?

Lea Cassar: That's right. It's difficult to delegate this type of tutorial. First of all, because if you haven't experienced such a path, it's difficult that you know what you're talking about. And second, that's in fact the most

important part, in my opinion, and also where I have most of the fun during tutorials. We really try to put into practice what we learn from the scientific evidence during the lecture. And typically, I start with breathing technique. I mean, some people are really not in connection with their body. They don't even realize when they are in a stress. They don't even know how to react to it. So the first thing is to get people in touch with their body and emotions. Then we learn to observe our thoughts. And the first point is, let's realize that we are making up stories about our life. And how can we get rid of the negative stories? We try to train the mind. Yeah, and then we do a lot of introspection work. So we start with just some personality tests to learn a little bit about yourself, about your personality traits, but also about your priorities, what you value. A lot of people don't know themselves. They never ask themselves these questions. And I think introspective work is crucial. I mean, Socrates says, know yourself. So that's, yeah, I would say I take this quote very seriously.

Katharina Herkommer: But still, I mean, you could say good for you if you found a way how you can lead a happier life. Good to know that science has found out some things about how to measure happiness. Why are you giving this course? Why do you have to give your knowledge towards the students? Do we need happier students?

Lea Cassar: Definitely. So I think this is for everybody. I think we should all strive to be happier. And this is, however, even more relevant now, because I think the data are suggesting that students are increasingly more miserable. I mean, Corona didn't help at all, obviously. And probably, I mean, Corona was also a way to realize how much fragile our mental health can be and that this is an important topic. And so I think, yes, we should have happier students. Absolutely.

Katharina Herkommer: Okay, but if I'm being mean, I can say, leave that to the psychiatrist or to the personal coach of an individual student. You're an economist. Why do you, as economists, care about the well-being of students or the well-being of people within a society?

Lea Cassar: Oh, I see why you're asking me this question. In fact, many people see economics as the discipline that studies how to maximize GDP, or how to maximize...

Katharina Herkommer: GDP is the Brutto Inlands product for our German listeners.

Lea Cassar: That's right. Thank you, I would have not be able to pronounce it myself. To maximize GDP and profits. But in fact, it is true that most of the economic discipline has been concerned with this point. But this is because there is the implicit assumption that this is what people care about, that this is what makes people happy. The moment that we are casting out this assumption, the homo economicus assumption, that we know we only care about money and that we know exactly what we care about and we know exactly how to get there, which I hopefully convinced you until now that this is not the case. We don't know what we want and we have a lot of biases. So once you cast out on this, then of course economics becomes about something else. And in fact, this is an all new chapters that I add to the course of Laurie Santos is what are the implications then for organizations, business organizations. And there, for example, we discuss about different leadership styles or different types of incentives. You know, a world where we say the only thing that matters is money, then how do you motivate people to work well? Well, you pay them. However, if you start to see a world in a different way, where people, you know, don't only care about money, but

that they realize it, for example, they look for a meaning in their job, so then, you know, you're going to use different instruments to motivate these people. A different type of leadership, for example, a transformational slash authentic leadership versus a pure transactional leadership style. So, of course, once we learn that, there are tremendous consequences in terms of HR practices and leadership styles at the organization level.

Katharina Herkommer: And has that reached HR departments in companies in Germany or Italy, for example, do you think there is a focus on that already?

Lea Cassar: So, there is an increasing number of companies worldwide, according actually to HBR (Harvard Business Review) article, at least 50% of the major company, for example, in the US, are offering some mindfulness program. As an example, to tell you that companies are realizing the importance of mental health and the well-being of their employees.

Katharina Herkommer: So, 10 or 15 years ago, we had the Mars and Snickers bars in Silicon Valley, and now we've got mindfulness as the new thing that you should offer your employees.

Lea Cassar: Yes, it's becoming a kind of a fashion, and of course, it's not all gold. There is also, of course, the wellness washing as the green washing, that, you know, I just offer my workers to meditate in the office with a meditation teacher, but then, you know, I expect them to work until late at evening, over time, or to work on weekend. I mean, that's totally contradictory, of course. So you need to differentiate between those companies that are generally interested in the well-being of their

employees and those of them that do just this strategically. But it is certainly one of the hottest topics at the moment. And, of course, these recent findings that money doesn't make us as happy as we think has also implications for macroeconomics, the economic policy of the government. The moment in which you realize, well, you know, maybe money doesn't make us as happy as we think, then maybe maximizing GDP should not be the priority of the government, or at least it shouldn't be the main measure of a performance of a country. I mean, I think it's legitimate to ask ourselves, and in fact, many countries has already done so, to what extent we want to, at the very least, to complement our GDP measures with, for example, a happiness index, another index that allow us to measure the well-being of people beyond the growth of the economy. And in fact, here, I feel I should mention Richard Layard, which is a very prominent scholar from LSE (London School of Economics). He makes the point that the best, the number one policy that the government should focus on is to improve people's mental health. Because it's very costly to have people suffering for several mental depression. And this is the policy that would have the highest increase in well-being for the money spent. And so given that ultimately, we care about well-being, even economists care about well-being. That's all our discipline is based on the assumption that we maximize our utility and our utility, this is somehow comparable to well-being. I think we should really start to take this well-being science or the science of well-being more serious.

Katharina Herkommer: Lea, you've been teaching the science of well-being in Regensburg twice now. I know it's always a bit stupid to be asked, do students like it? I should ask the students myself, but they are not here and you are here. Do you have any feedback? Did you get anything back? Did you do any evaluation?

Lea Cassar: Yes, the feedback is very positive. So first of all, I have a lot of students. This is just an elective course and I have about 80 students, which is a lot for an elective course. And also, what keeps me going is these private emails that the students send me. Especially, I would say the most common feedback that I get is, thank you, finally I'm learning something that is really useful for my life and that I can apply. And this means a lot to me because I'm also interested in meaning. And meaning is what's driving me to work. And so for me, teaching this course, it has been a blessing.

Katharina Herkommer: The semester has already started, but if someone has listened to this podcast now and really wants to join your course, is that still possible? Who can come, who can listen to your course?

Lea Cassar: Yes, of course. I'm always welcoming students. I don't put any limits. The only thing is that they should come as soon as possible because every part is important, builds on the next. So yes, well, I hope to see many of you in class.

Katharina Herkommer: So you've heard, you can come to the course of The Science of Well-Being. We'll put the link down in the show notes. Lea, we are almost done with our talk. How are you now?

Lea Cassar: Well, I'm a little bit tired, but also very happy with the conversation we are having.

Katharina Herkommer: You don't need much more energy. I've only got one more question. You know so much about what makes us happy, what doesn't make us happy. You are in some way a happiness expert, but how

are you doing, if that's not too personal, in your life? Do you manage to stick to your rules and to the things you know about well-being?

Lea Cassar: Thanks for asking that. I'm sorry if I'm going to disappoint many of the audience. Maybe you want to hear that I have it all sorted out and you just have to come to my class and I'm the wonderful guru who is going to tell you how to be happy. The truth is that I'm a student myself. You know, I'm also a human being. I'm not perfect. I also try to balance work with kids. It's not always easy. And so I'm learning. But I can tell you that compared to when I was a student myself, mid-twenties, now I am just turned 40 this year. I am a much more stable person than I used to be. I know where to look for inside myself if I need resources. How do I get out of this difficult situation? How do I not get overwhelmed by life events? Or where should I really prioritize my time and energy? So I learned this, which helped me tremendously in my life. And I'm sure that as me, everybody else can also learn.

Katharina Herkommer: Lea Cassar, thank you very much for being my guest today. Thank you for the nice conversation. I hope you enjoyed it here in our studio. Thank all of you out there for listening. And if you like our podcast, just give us some stars and tell others about it. And if you have any questions or suggestions, please write to us. The email address is kontakt@ur.de, kontakt@ur.de auf Deutsch, kontakt@ur.de. I am Katharina Herkommer, and I'm looking forward to our next episode with another of the so many interesting persons here at the University of Regensburg and his or her field of research. I hope all of you are really fine in the meantime.