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Presentation Transcript
Being Happy – Relationships
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Today we're continuing our series called *Being Happy*. This is the third part of the series. Last time we noted that the topic can be divided into three aspects: pleasure, engagement and meaning. That came from Dr. Seligman. We started last time on engagement and I was intent on continuing on to meaning today, but I thought better of it, because I wasn't satisfied with the coverage I gave to engagement. Part of engagement is relationship and I want to talk more about that aspect of engagement today, because that *is*, according to the research and what the Bible tells us, the most important part of being happy. So our title for today is *Being Happy – Part 3 – Relationships*. If you want to start at the beginning of the series, you can go to our LifeResource website at liferesource.org or you can check our YouTube channel, LifeResourceVideos – that's all one word.

To set the stage for this topic let's look into the Bible for a moment. Let's start in James 2:23.

James 2:23 – *And the scripture was fulfilled that says, "Abraham believed God and it was counted to him as righteousness and he was called a friend of God."*

There are quite a few people who think God was playing favorites when He chose Abraham over all other people. They think that it's not fair that God tells us that Israel was God's chosen nation either. And, of course, we know who they want God's friend, instead of Abraham and Israel, to be. But that's like saying, "It's not fair that you have John for your friend instead of me." God liked Abraham because Abraham *believed* God when He told him something – you know, I like my friends to believe that, too – and then went along with it. So he was a cooperative friend. Wouldn't you like that? So it wasn't a matter of playing favorites. It was a matter of mutuality. Other people weren't willing to be mutual with God the way Abraham was.

Let's look in John 15:15.

John 15:15 – *No longer do I call you servants – Jesus says to His disciples – for the servant does not know what his master is doing, but I’ve called you friends, for all that I’ve heard from My Father I’ve made known to you. You did not choose Me, but I chose you – how honoring – and appointed you, that you should go and bear fruit that your fruit should abide, so that whatever you ask of the Father in My name, He may give it to you.*

So here Jesus is pointing out that He chose and trusts His disciples. And that *is* friendship. Later He states that He hope they will learn to love Him as much as He loves them.

Consider this scripture in Matthew 25. I’m not going to turn to it, but instead recall that Jesus’ story of the ten virgins was about the wedding of Jesus Christ to the church. The church is pictured as a beautiful and special young woman who is to be the bride of Christ – that is, in an eternal relationship with her – in a close loving relationship forever.

So what does this tell us? That God created humankind for a special *relationship* with Him. And that, because of how we are, is going to make us happy. It’s all through the Bible, from page one. God made Adam and Eve. They loved Him and He loved them. The devil spoiled that relationship, and ever since, God has been patiently working His plan to ransom us from the devil and restore that lost relationship through Jesus Christ – His sacrifice and His life.

Now, if we look at the brain science, all these researchers, who look into the workings of the human brain, are coming to the same conclusion simultaneously. The brain is *designed* for relationship. When a baby is born, it begins immediately looking around for a face to connect to. When mother draws close and talks baby-talk to that infant, the little baby’s arms and legs pump in unison with the modulation of mother’s voice. The baby feels safe and secure, loved and understood. Even at a second old, she allows her mother into her mind. And that’s a good thing for her. If those moments of mind intertwine don’t take place, that is detrimental to the infant, because she was created for it. She was created for connection.

What are the spiritual implications of this fundamental developmental need? Let’s look in Genesis 1:26.

Genesis 1:26 – *Then God said, “Let us make man in Our image, after Our likeness.*

There’s been a lot said about this verse. The meaning of “in God’s likeness” is vast! And, included in it is the idea that we are like God. He made us *like* Him. He is relational and so are we – for our purposes today. The purpose for making us relational – we learn later in the Bible – is so that we can become part of a family that God is producing. He’s the Father, we’re the children. And that relationship is to extend into eternity. That relationship

is to be so close that the apostle Paul said, in 1 Corinthians 13:12, that he was looking toward the day when he would know God as well as God knew him – a close relationship.

So the Bible knowledge and brain science is good to know, but what does it mean for you and for me every day? What can we do with the knowledge? Well, that's where social science comes into the picture. It's intensely comforting to me that the Bible proves we are relational beings, and that brain science proves we are relational beings, and that, from social science – a completely different kind of science altogether – you can prove that we *are* relational beings. The good thing about social science is it also shows us *how* to be relational. I thought we could spend the rest of today, then, looking at social science and learning proven ways to become good at relationships.

And what would that have to do with happiness? Well, not surprisingly, when we humans, created as relational beings by God, have good relationship, social science tells us we will be happier. Social science has proven that when we have better relationships, we are happier. Not only that – like all good things of God – when we are happier, we have better relationships. Happiness and relationships are an upward spiral. If you're happy, it helps you have good relationships. And, if you have good relationships, it helps you be happier. They go together like peas and carrots.

So let's get to it. First, some little known truths about relationships.... Introverts benefit from relationships just like extroverts. It's just that they don't need as many.

Here's another one: We have an idea, in our society, about rugged individualism and going it alone and all that – very valuable, but that's really hard for us to do in actuality, according to research findings. People feel happier when they are working together and have the support of other people on the team. Even those who are individualistic do better when they have strong relationships. So those of you that think of yourself that way – you know, you islands out there – you do *better* if you had more help.

We can learn new relationship skills all our lives – even in old age. Did you know that? That's another thing that's very important to understand. Getting old is not an excuse to become a curmudgeon. If we do learn something new in our old age, or make a new friend, it helps us always, because we are relational all the way down to the cellular level from the instant we're conceived until the moment we die. All kinds of good things happen to us when we make friends and have positive social interaction.

Let's think about *why* relationships make us happy. When we're on our own, much of our energy is spent taking care of self, protecting self, watching our back, so to speak – our *own* back, actually. When we have loving relationships, we don't tend to narrow our focus onto self-care and survival tasks so much. We're free to reach out, look out, be more creative, be interested in other things and other people, which, in turn, increases the chance of creating an enriching relationship – another cycle.

I was talking to a thirty-five-year-old woman recently, and she was telling me that she had a good job, but she comes home to a large empty house every day. She has friends, but they don't seem to meet the husband need. She said, "Every day is the same. I get up, go to work, go to the gym, come home, walk the dog, and then, go to sleep. On the weekends, I clean and take care of the yard. There's no time for anything else. My mother told me last week that she feels like she's losing me." She wants to get married and have a family, but that biological clock is ticking. She asked me what she should do. I asked her what she would do with spare time, if she had any. And she said she would play soccer and "call my mom" more. She's very athletic. And I said, "Okay. You don't have to feel caught in the time trap. You can take measures to make your life better. You can hire somebody to take care of your yard and a housekeeper to do most of your housework. You can stop going to bars with your friends. Instead, in your new free time, you can join a soccer club, meet some nice guys – just be social, have some fun, see where it goes."

See how the lack of a partner took up all her time just maintaining everything? If there were two of them to take care of the house, it would have gone a lot faster. So it was narrowing her focus. If she hires some of the work out, she'll have time to be more creative, enhance the relationships she has and be available for new ones. She said, "I've been single so long, I wonder if any man would ever want me." See, she's been focused in so long on herself, she's starting to doubt herself. So I said, "Well, you have the lost keys syndrome." And she looked at me with a question mark on her face. And I said, "You know, when you lose your keys, you look for them and you don't find them. So you start over and look in all the same places you looked before and you don't find them. And then you chide yourself for looking for them in the same place, but you don't know what else to do, so you do it a third time? Well, after you've looked everywhere you can think of three or four times, you finally give up. And you think, 'Because I've looked everywhere over and over again, I'll never find them!' But then, after you've given up, when you least expect it, there they are! So, in reality, the whole time your keys were missing, you were moving through time toward the moment when you would find them."

Friendship, love, relationship is like that. If she finds someone, think how that will change her life. She won't have to do everything for herself anymore. She'll have even more time to invest in other fun things, like her husband, her children, etcetera.

Relationships, working together, sharing the work help all of us feel supported, capable and fulfilled. That's why healthy relationships make us happier.

Some things healthy relationships have in common – these are from *This Emotional Life* website: the ability to love and be loved. I quite often run into people who are more self-centered than most of us. They think a relationship is supposed to be for *their* pleasure. They don't understand that, if what happens in the relationship isn't good for the *other*

person, it's not going to be good for them either in the long run. Trying to be in a relationship with someone who doesn't get this is difficult, to say the very least.

Mutual understanding – so important. This is what I teach couples who are having problems – to do it, because it usually *the* problem – a lack of empathy.

I was watching Jeff Barker's film, *Manhunt*, recently. It's a documentary about the CIA's twenty year search for Bin Laden. One of the interrogators was asked what makes a good interrogator. I was expecting him to say, "A ruthless torturer, a water boarder, somebody that like to put somebody in states of deprivation," but instead, he said, "Empathy." It's a powerful force in relationships. Who has the most empathy for us? Well, God. He understands us, right? He's a good Friend, if we'll let Him be.

Another thing to think about is that relationships are a source of direct help in times of trouble.

I've always wanted to try to go backpacking alone – do a solo – but I never have. Why? Because breaking a leg while backpacking is never a good thing, but it's seldom fatal. But it could be, if I was by myself and didn't have anybody to go get help or help me get out. It's easier to live *with* someone than alone. And it's easier to work *with* someone than alone.

Another factor is the celebration of good times. My wife and I started out our relationship as friends. And years later, after I finished my master's degree, Elaine and I were as poor as church mice, but we pulled out our pop-up camper and went to a campground in a river valley north of Durango, Colorado. We gave ourselves a few dollars out of savings for spending money. We ate out a couple times, but mostly we fixed good food at the camper. We went shopping and we went hiking. We celebrated. I'd studied. Elaine held it together at home. And we celebrated what we had accomplished. It was a good thing for our relationship. I don't think I was thinking about it that way at the time, but I think the culmination, or the byproduct of it, was happiness together – strengthening of the relationship.

Another one is the validation of someone else. Someone wants to be our friend and that makes us feel good, doesn't it? That answers the question, "Who would want me?" So that's always a nice thing.

Security. You know, we all want to be secure, knowing that someone loves us. So that's an important factor to think about as well.

Also, when we're in relationship, a diversity of ideas and influences come together to help us grow and learn. Because our friends think differently than we do, it's a good thing for us – if we're open – to hear new ideas or even our ideas expressed in different ways. But we do, however, have to be open to accept those differences.

And then, just having fun is amazingly helpful to us. I have a fifteen-year-old girl that comes to my office every week. She never misses. She had a very damaging event occur in her life when she was twelve. She comes because she wants to learn how to get past it. Some of the time we talk about bad things, problems, hard stuff, but the other day she told me she skipped cheerleading practice to go to a concert. I asked her who performed and she listed at least ten bands. After she finished, she looked at me and slyly asked me if I knew any of them. And I said, “I never heard of a one of them.” And she playfully started listing other bands, and after ten minutes or so, I’d found two bands I’d heard of – Slip Not and Metallica – but I couldn’t produce a single song from either one of them from my memory. She thought that was just hilarious. So I countered a bit on my own. I said, “You know, Metallica is a really old band. I’m surprised you’ve heard of that one.” And I started rattling off some bands she’d never heard. So we were laughing before it was all over. And I realize the story loses something in the translation. We struggle with our age difference sometimes, because fifteen and sixty-eight...that is quite a gap. It’s kind of really amazing that we’ve been able to do as well as we have. So it’s just kind of fun to make fun of it, you know, and to make light of it, and to be friends about it. After that session, while we were walking out the door, she put her arm around my shoulder. Having fun helped her feel closer. It was a byproduct of our relationship and an enhancement to it all at the same time. In the next session, it won’t be quite so hard for her to talk about hard things, because we’re building a close relationship. And part of that is just sometimes having some fun.

One final point about the connection between happiness and relationships before moving on: humans have the ability to adapt quickly to circumstances around them. We talked about this before in this series. That’s why, when we get a new car, we feel a rush of happiness for a while, but then we go back to a baseline level of happiness later. With close relationships this often isn’t true. We are more likely to continue to derive happiness from close relationships and to derive positive emotions from them long after the newness of them has worn off. When a person falls in love, for example, there is that same kind of rush – or better – that no one could ever endure for long, because it’s so intense. But after living with Elaine for forty-six years, the happiness and satisfaction continues to increase. It’s amazing how this works. It’s like ever new, in a way.

How does one build those very valuable relationships? Well, the first point I want to bring out is, you need to make an effort. That’s kind of before the steps, really. It just bears saying that nothing will help, if a person isn’t willing to take action. All our lives we are able to reach out and make new connections. Saying “Nobody like me. Nobody cares. I don’t have anybody....” My friend, Dave, who has expressive aphasia, when he hears those kind of self-pitying remarks, he says, “Waaah, waaah.” The evidence shows that we’re all capable of reaching out to others *if* we only will.

So connect every day. That’s another one. Make an effort every day to connect with *somebody*. Smile. Speak. Make eye contact. Do random acts of kindness. Hold the door

open. Even if your efforts don't meet with a vibrant new friendship, you'll still *feel* better for the effort. And these efforts are good for us – maybe even more than for the one we're helping – you know, let that light shine!

Here's another one that came from the website – *That Emotional Life* – “act as if.” Even if you're not a very outgoing person, if you make an effort, if you push yourself, you'll feel better and be encouraged from the effort, and also get better at it. I think I mentioned last time...the depressed client who helped an elderly woman whose car had broken down. He said afterward, “I noticed I wasn't as depressed after I helped her.”

Here's another factor that causes people some problem. Some people relationship as someone who loves *me*. When two people like this get together, it can't possibly work. Others see it as a relationship “where I love somebody.” When people like this get together, it almost always works. Relationship is something you *give*. It's not something you can *get* from somebody, or *take* from them, or *make* them like you. You know, “Here's fifty bucks. Like me.” That doesn't work. So it's something you *give*. And that's what fosters the relationship – and certainly not in most cases, but you only need one.

Cultivate compassion. Take the time to understand people. You know, I worked at an elementary school that was right out at the edge of town...I guess I was there about three years. Parents would come into my office unannounced and just rip on the principal because she did this and she did that. And half the time, the things they were talking about, you know, really were not the principal's job, or something she couldn't do, or something like that. One day I was talking to my supervisor, and he pointed out to me that that elementary school was out on the edge of town because, during the seventies, there was a program called urban renewal – government money spent by bureaucrats, given to local communities to upgrade their downtowns. And in Albuquerque, they pushed all the poor people out of downtown into this subdivision, and they renewed the downtown center. You can't tell by looking at it now, but anyway.... So you have all these people all grouped together out here, and they have this one experience in common: they were forced out of their homes and they were put in a place where there was no services, nothing to do. It was really bleak out there. And it still was all those years later when I got there – hardly anything out that direction. So they were paranoid about authority. So they would come into my office to complain – probably not even knowing who I was – just an open door – and I would just sit and nod my head and reflect back what I was hearing from them, and show respect. And pretty soon, they'd start calming down. And they just came back, because they knew there was somewhere where they could be heard. I just had to learn what was going on and be compassionate. The people that were coming to my office were the children of the people that were kicked out years ago. And *their* children were the ones going to school at this elementary school. So it was quite an interesting situation to be in, but just being compassionate and having empathy for people solved a lot of the problems that that school had.

Communication is the next one I want to talk about. It's clear that most of us know it takes communication to build relationships. But some of us don't know how to deepen communication. People tell me in therapy that once they talk out and they start putting out into the air the things they've bottled up for years, they're like a cork out of the bottle, and they go around disclosing way too much highly sensitive information to too many people that aren't ready to hear it – you know, TMI in the worst possible way. But it just feels so good to them to finally let it out. So here's what I counsel them to do: When a friend discloses some personal information to you, after listening and after attending, then disclose some of your information that's at about the same level of disclosure. Go at it slowly and patiently. If they feel a little bit exposed in your presence, because they've divulged something, you don't throw up your hands in holy horror, or roll your eyes, or tell them to shut up, and then you reveal a little bit about yourself that's at about the same level, they'll realize that they're not so weird and that they can talk about this with you, because you understand and you *showed* them, because you were able to disclose, too. But, you know, if somebody says, "I've got a hangnail," and you say, "I was raped," that's not level. We've got to even that out. Just because things have happened to us does not mean that we *have* to talk about them just because we can.

How do you increase your social network? That's such a huge problem for people today. We sit in cubicles at work. And then we go home and never see them till the next day. We're so busy we don't have time for it. People think social media is the way to build relationships, but it's actually become anti-social media, because so many people *don't* know how to build relationships. All they do is trash-talk each other. So, it's not really a good way.

What can you do to build relationships? Well, you can join a gym, if that's what you like to do. I had this boy come to me once. He was referred by another therapist. He was, I think, twenty-one or two – basketball player – had to have knee surgery, was a fire fighter now, had to rehab his knee at the gym. He told me he was wondering if he was gay. I said, "Well, why would you think that?" And he said, "Well, when I was in high school, I had this girlfriend. She was really nice." Or, "This girl liked me" – that was the story. "And I just didn't do anything with it and my friend asked me – my best friend – 'if you don't want to have a relationship with her, can I try?'" So she became the girlfriend of my best friend, because I didn't want to make the effort." And I said, "Anything else?" And he said, "Well, you know, I'm a firefighter, and I go to the gym and work out, and I come home and I live at my house, and I'm only around guys. I never see any girls or talk to them." I said, "I'll tell you what. Let's find out. That gym you go to. Do they have a lot of machines there – workout machines, like treadmills and ellipticals?" He said, "Oh yeah." I said, "Do girls come and work out there?" "Yeah." I said, "When is the next time you're going to go?" He said, "Tomorrow." I said, "Okay. Here's your assignment then. Look down through there and find a girl that's working out that looks nice to you, and go get up on the empty treadmill – or whatever it is – that's beside her, and ask her to help you figure out how to work it, and just start up a low-level conversation with her. And then come back and tell

me what happened.” So he comes in the next day, and he says, “I’m not gay!” He just didn’t have enough exposure to women and that’s, basically, what he needed. And he wasn’t talking to the women he saw.

So join a gym. Talk to people. Walk your dog. Talk to the people you pass – other dog walkers – talk to them. Do lunch, you know, with friends that you have. Maybe they’ll invite somebody along that you’ll get to know. Take a class. That’s a great way to meet people, because they’re doing things that are similar to the things you’re doing and interested in the same thing. Volunteer. You’ll meet people that need help, but you’ll also meet other volunteers that interested, like you are, in helping them. Go to church – great way to meet people and meet people of similar mind in many circumstances. So you’ve got to get out there and make an effort or nothing is going to happen. It’s just going to stay the same. Doing the same thing and expecting different consequences – different results – is crazy, so don’t do it.

Maintaining relationships – how do we do that? Once we have some relationships, what do we do to maintain them? Well, it takes *time* to maintain relationships, so get used to that idea. “Well, I don’t have time.” Well, then, be lonely. That’s what you’ve got left. It takes time. You can’t have a friendship by yourself. You have to have it with other people. So that takes times time – to get together with them. When we’re god, that’s not going to be a factor anymore, because we’ll be outside of time, but now it is a big factor. You can’t have any good relationships that don’t require time. It just doesn’t work like that.

We talked a little about this last time, but it’s important to bring up again, and that is to *engage* when we’re with people. Have you ever been talking to somebody and realized they’re just waiting for you to stop so they can say what they want to say? That’s not engagement when you feel that from somebody else. Men are worse at this than women. Men think women are telling them about their problems so the men can fix them, but women really want to be understood rather than fixed. That’s why they’re talking to men. So, to be understood, requires engagement on the part of the man – not a solution, but an engagement. Did you get that, guys? Especially you engineers. You know, your job is to solve problems, so it’s just natural that you would go that way instead of toward engagement. Engagement doesn’t solve any problems where you work, but with women, it does. It *is* the solution.

I had an engineer in my office one time with a sixteen-year-old daughter. They had a disagreement and they came to me so I could kind of help them work their way through it. I think they were hoping I’d provide a solution, but I knew the solution was with them. So he’s slapping the back of his hand with his other hand – you know, his palm – and he’s very vociferously making his point. All of the points he made were good, but she started to cry. And he got all upset – not upset, but shocked – and he said, “Why are you crying?” He said, “I don’t think I’m attacking you.” And she said, “It’s always the same thing. You

never listen and you just try to fix me.” So what did she want? What did she want, guys? She wanted him to listen to her. And that would have helped. Okay?

Be supportive. That’s the next one. Talking to a good friend, whose son died, and at the funeral,” he said, “and ask, ‘What can we do to help?’ but we were so devastated we just didn’t know. But there was this one couple who took a different approach. They would say, ‘We can fix food for dinner tomorrow. We can come over and help with laundry and cleaning. We can walk your dogs.’ My wife and I will never forget them. They were so supportive. They just knew what we needed and they provided it.” So that kind of proves that when you provide support, it deepens relationship, doesn’t it? Because they are very close to those people now.

The next one: share your admiration and gratitude. Remember when you first met your friend – whoever that might be? What was it you liked about them? Tell them about it now. Show appreciation for the things they do for you. Talk about the relationship and how grateful you are for it and for them. You don’t have to get mushy or maudlin or do it every time you see them, but when there’s an opportunity to show admiration and gratitude, or something of that close nature, then go for it.

Trust. Count on others who have proven trustworthy in the past. Let them know you’re counting on them. Some people have a hard time trusting others, even though they’ve been proven trustworthy. So that’s a problem. That’s a block – barricade, a barrier – to close relationship. And there’s reasons why people have that problem and they’re not that hard to fix. So let them know you’re counting on them when you’ve asked them to do something or something’s come up. That’s a compliment. You know, when people tell me that I’ve been trustworthy, I feel good about that. It makes me want to spend more time with them rather than with all the people that don’t trust me. So go for it.

Finally, celebrate. When something good happens to your friend, be happy with them. I worked with a woman for four years whose daughter committed suicide. She said, “I thought I would never get past it, but with your help, I did. And now I’m sad that I don’t need to come anymore, because I won’t see so much of you.” And I said, “Well, I’m sad that I won’t get to see as much of you either, but more, I’m also happy that you feel better, so it’s time to celebrate all the hard work you did and how much you love your daughter and what a strong person you are.” And that made her feel good.

Play. I think we covered this one, but don’t forget it. It’s important. My brother and I conduct a long distance relationship all year long by phone, but once a year we go backpacking together. We have a lot of fun. We listen to music. We tell family stories till we laugh so hard we can’t breathe. We eat good food. We see amazing animals and vistas. All that fun strengthens our relationship. It’s amazing how that works.

Well, that's it for today. There are a few points on how to build relationships in an increasingly non-relational world. We focused on what science has to say about it today, but remember, every time you make a friend or maintain a close loving relationship with your child or your mate, you're practicing for an amazing relationship in eternity with God our Father and Jesus Christ our Brother. And that's when the real happiness is going to start. So get good at it while you have the chance.