

# Think Tank: What makes you happy?

## Speakers:

**Erica Hanlon, Clinical Counselor & Life Coach**

**Lynn Borteck, Clinical Counselor**

**Angee Bell, Communications Manager**

Erica Hanlon: Hi, everybody. You are listening to the Think Tank Podcast. My name is Erica Hanlon. I'm a licensed professional counselor and life coach. And today, I'm joined by my two partners in crime, Angela Bell communications manager, and Lynn Borteck licensed clinical social worker. And today's podcast is all about happiness. Now, Lynn, I know that you came across a quiz online about happiness and let's let's maybe test our little happiness IQs how much we know about happiness.

Lynn Borteck: Okay. So these are just a few questions and let's see how we do Angie. I will ask you the first question. Is this statement true or false? You're either born happy or you're born unhappy?

Angela Bell: I think it has to be unhappy. You come out crying, right? So that doesn't sound very happy.

Lynn Borteck: That's a really good point. So the answer is false. And actually for a very long time, people thought that everybody is hardwired to either be a really happy person or a really negative unhappy person, no matter what happens in your life. But now we realize that certain mindsets and certain practices allow us to make a choice and make our own personal happiness. So let's try number two, Erica, why don't you take this one? Tell me, which is your choice overall happy people do not, A, get exercise, enjoy intimacy with someone special, eat and sleep well. B, happy people do not feel gratitude, optimism, and pleasure each day, or C happy people do not have higher IQs and make more money. Which do you think is correct?

Erica Hanlon: So I know that Lynn, if you and I were working with a client, we would encourage them to do things like get exercise and eat and sleep well and take care of their bodies. But also to practice things like gratitude and optimism and do things that they enjoy every day to improve their mood and their overall wellbeing. So I'd have to say that the last one is

not true. I know they say money can't buy you happiness. I would assume smarts can't buy you happiness either.

Lynn Borteck: That's exactly right. Sometimes we look at people who are driving around in fancy cars or wearing fancy clothes or whatever. And we think, "Oh, they must be happier than I am." Or if they're really smart. They must be happier than I am. But neither of those is true. The people who tend to be happier are the ones who are grateful and optimistic and who do get exercise. They enjoy intimacy with special people in their life and eat and sleep well. So, yeah. Great. Let's go to number three, choose one answer from these four options. At what age do people tend to be the happiest? A, from 10 to 17 years old, B, from 18 to 29 years old, C, from 30 to 50 years old or D, 50 years old and over, which do you think?

Erica Hanlon: I know when your unhappiest?

Lynn Borteck: When?

Erica Hanlon: I can say which age you're the least happy?

Lynn Borteck: When?

Erica Hanlon: During middle age, your thirties and forties, you tend to be the least happy, happiest. There's like all this research it dips down during middle age and then it climbs back out over when you were about 50. They even see it in like primates their happiness dips in middle age.

Lynn Borteck: Okay. Angee, what do you think?

Angela Bell: Yeah, I think that'd be the opposite for me because the thirties were probably the best so far for me. I really liked my thirties. I'm 40 now. So we'll see how that goes. 10 through 17. I was not happy. I had a lot of puberty and everything and life changes, and 18 through 29, I was just trying to fit... So for me personally, I would probably choose C.

Lynn Borteck: 30 through 50. Okay. Well, you know what. The experts and the people who do research say that people who are over 50 tend to be less stressed, they get less angry and upset about things. And overall, they tend to be less worried. They tend to also feel better about themselves. And the researchers say that it might really just be that as you age, you get to know yourself better, you get to react to experiences differently and you just develop different emotional intelligence about the world.

Angela Bell: Interesting. That makes a lot of sense. You're at your peak, you have all of your experience from life and you can take that all in, and feel comfortable with who you are and the life around you.

Lynn Borteck: So thanks ladies for taking part in that little survey, if you're interested in, or if any listeners are interested in taking more of the questions. These are only three questions out of a survey that I found on WebMD. And if you're interested in finding it, you can just go to WebMD and search for happiness and you'll find this quiz.

Erica Hanlon: All right. So should we talk about happiness itself and things that people can do to boost their happiness levels?

Lynn Borteck: Yeah.

Erica Hanlon: So happiness is partially what happens and partially how you perceive it. Although, I would say it's mostly how you perceive it. You know the saying when you get lemons make lemonade or sour grapes, you get grapes and then you think that they're sour. So here's an example, the pandemic is the pandemic. But some people are having... They're fine. I have some clients right now who are living their best lives during the pandemic. I know some people for whom it's really helped them get in touch with what matters. Other people are having a really hard time. So even situations like COVID-19 can have positives based on how you look at them. So let's talk about some things that tend to be on many people's what makes me happy list.

Angela Bell: I think one of the big things that people can do that's really simple and easy is gratitude. Look at the world around you, look at your life that you're living and what you're thankful for. There's so many things out there that we can be thankful for. Sometimes I think of even the little tiny, small things that make me happy. Like those little tiny little flowers in the grass, they're just so tiny, the little purple ones those always make me smile. And I like to go up and look at them really close, just little things like that. My ducks in the yard playing around and splashing in the little pool we have for them. That always makes me laugh and I'm so grateful for them. Of course, I'm grateful for family and so many other things, but I think just taking time each day, you could get a journal and jot down maybe just one thing each day. You jot down one thing you're grateful for and go on to the next day, or maybe you just do it once a week.

There's a guy at work who actually does this thing called thankful Thursday and every Thursday. And he's so, so consistent. I can't believe he does this every single Thursday, and he's been doing it for

years now. And every Thursday, he puts this post out there called his thankful Thursday. And it's like a little blog. And he does five things that he's grateful for. And then people can respond and post their five things. I'm just really in awe of him and his ability to be able to do that every single Thursday, you get so busy and sucked up into these life and work and things. It's hard to take time to slow down and think about the things you're grateful for. But when you do, it really makes you smile.

Lynn Borteck: I love that. And I think that I'm not a journal person, but I think that writing down the things that make you happy from day to day is a really great tool. Because then on a day when you're feeling bummed out, you can look back on your gratitude journal. But I agree with you, the smallest things make me happy if I focus on things. Maybe it's not small, but we adopted a puppy during the pandemic. And Oh my gosh, she gives me a thousand reasons to laugh every single day and smile. And I'm so grateful that we got her during this time.

Angela Bell: Another good thing is giving back and volunteering in your community or wherever you are. Right now during COVID, there's all kinds of online, virtual ways that you can volunteer too, but also helping people in your local neighborhood. We have a neighbor who's a little bit older and she needs help. She needs rides here, there times, or I've ordered groceries for her before. Chris has helped her cabling and internet over there. So I think it's finding those little ways that you can help and volunteer. Lynn, I know you've done a lot of different things in your community.

Lynn Borteck: Yeah. I have found, I didn't even know that these opportunities existed. But during the time that people were really sheltering in place and not going very much of anywhere, I learned that there were meal delivery options to frail elders and so forth. And I got very involved in that and it really is gratifying. And it made me very happy. It's amazing how happy you can feel from helping other people.

Erica Hanlon: Yeah. So people can check out what kind of opportunities there are in their area to give back and maybe boost their happiness levels.

Angela Bell: Yeah. And there's a couple of good sites out there where you can find different opportunities in your local neighborhood. Just put your zip code in and they'll give you all kinds of different ideas. Another good thing is just smiling and laughing every day. It actually releases oxytocin, which is a feel good chemical in your brain and laughing, lowers your stress and it boosts your immune system. So it's really a very physically good thing for you. And it will make you physically feel

better. There's so many ways you can smile and laugh. I like to watch funny movies even the same ones that I've seen 10 times, I'll still watch it because it's classic humor. It just makes me laugh all the time.

Erica Hanlon: Right now. I have been curating my entertainment very carefully because the world is offering up a lot of stress on a little poo platter, it's like a poopoo platter of stress. So in my free time, I'm careful about watching movies and TV shows that are fun and easy to watch. Short little videos on social media that are funny are really great. Those are the things that I've been doing.

Lynn Borteck: Yeah. On the same note, it's really funny because my husband and I sit down and watch something on TV at night, we usually like those spy and that kind of movies, suspense and all that. We have been agreeing to turn off almost everything that has violence or just too much suspense because we're already worked up, we don't need it. We need something light.

Angela Bell: Yeah. And one of the best ways to smile and laugh is with your family and your friends. When you're around people that make you laugh sometimes it's just those people that everything that happens it's funny. And you're laughing all the time when you're with those people or talking with those people.

Lynn Borteck: That's a really good point because another thing that makes people happy is having good relationships with family and friends. Because when you spend time with people that you like, your spending time in supportive positive relationships, and that helps you when you're stressed out. Of course, you have to be careful who you pick as friends. You want to pick people who tend to be more positive or look at life more optimistically, and you can also bond with other people through common experiences, just like life's ups and downs. I know a lot of my friends and I talk almost every day, although we don't see each other everyday because of COVID. But we talk every day or we connect virtually, by video chat or something. And we're really bonding through this difficult time. So having a support network can be very, very important to being a happy person.

Angela Bell: That's so true during this time with COVID and everything. It's funny because a lot of my family is in another state. So I typically don't see them very often anyway. We have phone calls and things like that, but with COVID and everything and all of these video chats and people encouraging that, I've actually seen them quite a lot more lately than ever before. We're doing regular video chats. And I feel like we're even bonding and connecting even more. And it does, it makes me feel so

good just to see them and see how they're doing and see the nieces and nephews and stuff.

Erica Hanlon: Yeah. It's been the same on my end, we have standard video calls set up with my parents. Brendan does a call with his parents once a week. And then I have a call set up with some close friends of mine or we just have coffee together. I think those relationships are really important.

Lynn Borteck: I also think that what I mentioned finding, or bonding hanging around more, even virtually with people who think optimistically is good and trying to help yourself think optimistically. Not looking for all of the bad news every day, even though that's pretty much what we get. But looking for some happy stories in the newspaper or on TV or something, because when you think optimistically, you can find things that will make you feel happier. And make you feel like there is really... there are great things ahead and just happier overall.

Erica Hanlon: I was listening to a woman talk, maybe it was a couple months ago. And she was really disappointed because she had this amazing European trip planned that she had been looking forward to for like a year or something. And then it got canceled because of the pandemic. And as I was watching her get coached and where she landed was that part of the fun of the trip is the anticipation of it. And now she gets to anticipate it longer because it's going to be put off. So now she gets to anticipate it and enjoy the anticipation of the trip for a longer period of time.

Lynn Borteck: That's cool.

Angela Bell: That's an interesting perspective. That's definitely an optimistic viewpoint.

Erica Hanlon: And I think you can feel sad. There's nothing wrong with feeling sad and feeling disappointed or even worrying about the future. I don't think there's anything wrong with that. I think it's important to give equal airtime to the best case scenario too.

Lynn Borteck: I was just thinking going back to the news, which I find to be generally a downer. I was so thrilled to see a really happy story today on the front page of my newspaper, where lifeguards actually saved somebody whose plane went down in some fairly shallow water at the beach. And I thought, "Oh my gosh, a great, happy story with a happy ending. This is wonderful. And I'm so glad it's on the front page, and it's not hidden somewhere where I won't see it. This is wonderful." It really made me feel better. And it just tickled that optimistic bone.

Angela Bell: Yeah. Kudos to that paper for putting a positive story like that on the front page.

Lynn Borteck: So another thing that you can do that will definitely make you feel better, even though sometimes it's hard to convince yourself of this is to exert yourself. And to get up off the couch even when you're feeling blue and you just want to melt into the cushions or take a nap. The human body was really made to move, and the body does its best job in every way when it is exercised. And so going even to take a walk, you don't have to go run five miles or anything, even just taking a walk helps you because those feel good hormones that Angie talked about before oxytocin, that gets released when you exercise and it just lifts your spirits. Try taking a walk and see if you don't come back feeling better. And also it helps release some of your stress. It's a healthy way to release stress.

Angela Bell: Yeah. I do an exercise every morning. I'm going to say I have been sticking to it. There was about two months that I was completely off of it, but I got back on track and I can tell you I feel so much better when I do it. There are some days I miss because I'm not perfect. And I have to give myself grace, but I've been doing it pretty regularly for the past month or so. And when I do miss a day, I can feel the difference. It's a great way to start my day and set my intention.

Erica Hanlon: Yeah. I feel like I'm out of my exercise routine also, but back when I was doing it on a regular basis, I could not go longer than two days. Like if I went two days in a row without working out by that third day, I was starting to get moody and cranky.

Angela Bell: It's easy to get into a rut though. Once you go those two days, you're like maybe it's a third day. Like, "Ah, what's the difference." And then before you know it a week then a month and then you get stuck in a rut. So just remembering the positive feelings that you had when you were doing it so that you can get back to it.

Erica Hanlon: A little like hack I've used when I have not been motivated to go for a walk or just get outside and get moving is I'll tell myself, all I have to do is put on my shoes and walk out the door. And then I can come back in if I want, but I just need to put up my shoes and I can just walk out the door and walk out to the front porch. And that's all I have to do. That's the goal. And that feels so much more attainable than the thought like, "Oh, I need to go and get on my shoes and I need to go walk two miles or three miles." When I think that my brain is like, no way, that's too much work. But once I'm out the door with my shoes on, I can come

back inside, but usually I keep going. I'm like, "All right, I'm out here. Oh, it's so nice. I think I'll walk."

Angela Bell: Yeah. I love that.

Lynn Borteck: That's such a smart thing because you're breaking it down into smaller steps.

Erica Hanlon: And then you have the momentum to keep going and it's easier. And I love exercise for all kinds of reasons. It's a mood booster, it's good for your body physically, but it also helps you get a better nights rest. I just gave a webinar on this the other night. Sleep is so important and sleep is really important to your mood too. There's a reason why mood disorders like depression and anxiety interfere with your sleep and then vice versa. They're just so closely tied. So just getting a good night's sleep, seven to nine hours, I think is the average for adults can make a huge difference in your ability to manage stress and feel good.

Angela Bell: Yeah. When I get four hours of sleep or something like that. My mind doesn't function the same way the next day. I can't even make decisions quickly enough. I'll be in a meeting and somebody is asking me something or they say something, and I just have to ask them to repeat it again because I'm not even focusing very well. So yeah. Sleep is so important.

Erica Hanlon: You want to aim for a healthy amount of sleep. Like any good thing. There can be too much of a good thing and there can be too much sleep. So if you are consistently sleeping say 10, 11, even 12 hours, or you're just sleeping all day long, you probably want to talk to a doctor about that.

Angela Bell: That's a good point.

Lynn Borteck: Talking about sleep. I find that sometimes not every single day, but sometimes I just get where I just need to put my head down. And sometimes a nap of a half hour to an hour can make me feel fabulous. I just feel like I'm starting the day all over again. I feel very rejuvenated and it's really terrific.

Angela Bell: Yes. I do power napping. And not very often, I used to do it more often. I find that the more I work out, the less naps I feel like I need. But power napping is where you just do 15 minutes, 15 to 20 minutes. And that's it. And some people can't really do that because they can't fall asleep that soon. But I only do it when you get those sleepy eyes and your eyes are just closing and your like, "Ah, duh, duh, duh." You start talking in your



sleep out loud and you're like, "Whoa." I need to go to sleep because I'm not getting anything done here. So at that point, I'll set my alarm on my phone and I'll just lay down for about 15 minutes. And as soon as that goes up, I wake up and I get right back to it. And I feel refreshed.

Erica Hanlon: I'm jealous of people who can nap. I am not a napper, I spend the entire time laying there trying to fall asleep. And then I fall asleep finally. And then I end up napping too long. So then when I wake up, then I'm groggy and then I have trouble falling asleep at night. I am not a good napper, but I'm very jealous of people who are, I want to be a good napper.

Angela Bell: I'm the same way. If I sleep too long, if I do a too long of a nap it's not good. Because then I will feel groggy when I wake up. And then I won't be able to get to sleep, but that's why I just... I got to do 15 minutes. And that's it.

Erica Hanlon: I think in the webinar I gave it said when I was researching this, I think they said 30 minutes, don't go past 30 minutes because then you'll start to be in a deeper phase of sleep. And so you will wake up groggy. So they said, I think 30 minutes is good.

Angela Bell: Interesting.

Erica Hanlon: Well, and I think given what's going on right now, we're seeing all kinds of people do things that are very upsetting for us. But I think, right now all you have to do is turn on the news or get on social media. And you're going to see somebody doing something that you don't like that is very upsetting to you. And so I think learning how to extend grace to other people and forgive them. And maybe it's not even just about forgiving people for what they're doing right now, but forgiving people for things in the past. Are you carrying things with you now that you're upset about that had that happened in your past. Because that's not hurting the other person to carry around that anger and all those upset feelings it's really impacting your ability to be happy. And forgiving somebody isn't like saying that what they did was okay or what they're doing is okay. It's about setting that boundary between you and them and choosing not to carry around their choices and anger about their choices.

Angela Bell: Yeah. And I think you have to forgive yourself. And sometimes that can be the hardest thing to do. I know I struggled with that in the past with some of my feelings of guilt. It's interesting that we're going through all of these different tips and things, exercising, getting enough sleep, thinking optimistically, connecting with friends and family. All of these

different things, volunteering, but you're not going to be able to do those things all the time. And you're going to slip. You're going to miss some of those things. And you may have days where you're not so happy. You have to forgive yourself and you have to move on.

Lynn Borteck: In webinars that I gave on forgiving. They make a very good point that you could be angry about something that somebody did, or something that they don't even know they upset you. And so walking around angry at them and being negative about something and carrying a grudge is all about you. It's internal for you. It's not something between you and another person, it's really about you not letting something go.

Angela Bell: That's a great point. You can't control what other people do. Don't they call mini volcanoes or whatever, where people just have all this feelings towards somebody of anger or resentment, and they don't ever communicate about them. And then the smallest thing happens they accidentally knock a glass over, and then person explodes at them because they've been bottling up all these feelings and emotions. And you're like, "What, I just spilled a glass of water." It's much more than that. You definitely have to get those feelings out and talk about them with people and forgive them. Even if you don't talk about them, I think inside in yourself, or working with a counselor, you have to find a way to forgive others.

Lynn Borteck: When they say forgive and forget. You don't have to forget. But the fact is that some of the people that you're still angry at may not even still be alive. And so you may not be able to work it out with them, but you still need to work out within yourself. If you want to be a happy person, a way to forgive whatever it is that you're feeling about them or whatever they did.

Angela Bell: Forgiveness is definitely complicated.

Erica Hanlon: Yeah. It's definitely complicated for sure. Talking about forgiveness stressed me out. Let's talk about stress. Stress and happiness. There's plenty to stress about. There always is. There's always plenty to stress about. And I think especially right now, good grief, there's a lot going on. There's a lot to feel stressed about. So learning how to manage your stress, I think is so, so important when it comes to happiness.

Lynn Borteck: Totally. I totally agree. And I think de-stressing is one of the most important things that we can do. It's a really important part of taking care of ourselves and keeping ourselves happy. So I think that one of the most important happiness tools that we can have in our happiness toolbox is a way that we distress, whether it's exercise or painting or

writing or talking on the phone with a really good friend. Something healthy, something that's not bad for you, something that will help you de-stress and avoid more stress.

Angela Bell: Yeah. I think also we're saying avoid stress, but at the same time, I think it's more important to think around managing stress. Because we're always going to have stress. Stress is always going to be there. It's a natural response in our body. We just have to find ways to manage that stress because it's really a matter of how well you can handle that stress. If you're not able to control all the stress in your mind, then you're going to feel stressed out and you're going to be very unhappy. But if you can find ways to manage that stress then it's going to feel like life is more manageable and you're going to be able to experience happiness more. Just like with work. I can look at my work and I can say, "Oh my goodness, I have so much to do. There's no way I'm going to be able to accomplish this." And I can just like that will stress me out, just looking at everything I have to do.

But on the other hand, if I say, "Okay, what am I going to do today? Here's what I'm going to do today." And I jot down three or four things that I know I can accomplish today. Then at the end, I don't feel so stressed because I'm not sitting there thinking about everything that's coming at me. I'm thinking about one thing at a time, and I'm going from one thing to the next. And I think that helps me manage my stress.

Erica Hanlon: Because I think a lot of times we try to berate ourselves into being productive.

Angela Bell: Yeah.

Erica Hanlon: You know what I mean? It just backfires. It just makes you feel like you're failing all over the place.

Angela Bell: Exactly. That's exactly right. Because if you start something and then you get started on another thing and it's like, you can't ever accomplish anything, you feel very unsuccessful at the end of the day.

Lynn Borteck: Well, that takes me back to our very first podcast on multitasking on how unsatisfying and unproductive it is. And so I think what you said is really so relevant to staying happy and satisfied, and not being down on yourself. Is to pick and choose what you can realistically get done and then attack those things, or go after those things rather than overwhelming yourself and overwhelming yourselves not only with work, but with the stress that goes with it.

Angela Bell: And it's funny that you mentioned the multitasking thing because at work we've started doing video cam meetings a lot more with like all kinds of meetings. And I've talked to a lot of people and they're doing video cam meetings too. And I find that it's much more of a productive meeting because we're all paying attention because we're all on camera. And I think I also feel happier at the end of the meeting because I got to see people that I don't normally see. And I just hear their voices all the time, but you're seeing them, you're seeing their surroundings and sometimes a kid will pop in or they'll pull up an animal. They're furry-

Erica Hanlon: Are you talking about my kid?

Angela Bell: Definitely. Definitely. But it's great.

Lynn Borteck: And my animal!

Angela Bell: And that's another part of connectedness of happiness where you're connecting with others more versus just the telephone. Just seeing people I think is another part of making people happy. Well, so how can you find your happy? I mean, we've talked about all of these different kinds of tips and suggestions on ways to become happy, but it's going to be different for everyone.

Everyone's going to have different ways that makes them happy, different things that they can do that makes them smile. I think there's a lot of great tips that you can introduce in your day to day. Maybe just choose one of these and try it everyday. Maybe it's the gratitude thing or maybe it's calling a friend once a week and connecting with them. You don't have to push it to the max and I'm going to be the ultimate happy person, and try to do all of these things. But you don't have to do that. You don't have to do that. To find happiness and to find your happiness, you can just do a few simple things and find what works for you.

Lynn Borteck: Make it a project, make it a happiness search. And just start to notice the things in your everyday life that make you happy. And you might want to jot them down or just take note of the fact that, "Hey, that made me happy. I'm going to do that again."

Angela Bell: That's a great idea. I love that. Honestly, don't expect perfection. Nobody's going to be happy 100% of the time. That's not realistic. You're going to get down. You're going to have good days and bad days and that's okay-

Erica Hanlon: And really no matter where you fall on the happiness scale, maybe you're feeling happy right now, but you want to feel happier. Maybe you have one bad day where you're unhappy. Maybe you have lots of days where you're unhappy all in a row, no matter where you fall on that spectrum help is available for you to improve your mood. So you can contact your employee assistance program and get free short term therapy. It's a really amazing resource to help you live a happier and healthier life.

All right, so that concludes our podcast for today. Thanks for listening and on how to be happy and join us next month when we're going to talk all about how pets are super awesome. Meow.

Lynn Borteck: Woof, woof, woof.

Angela Bell: Quack.

## Resources For Living

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