

**Shrink Rap Radio #187, December 18, 2008 — Happy At Last  
David Van Nuys, Ph.D., aka “Dr. Dave” interviews Richard O’Connor,  
Ph.D.**

(Transcribed from [www.ShrinkRapRadio.com](http://www.ShrinkRapRadio.com) by Goh LH, Lawrence)

**Excerpt:** *So the good news is we can change our own brain if we practice living mindfully, if we practice thinking of three good things at night, if we practice making wiser decisions. The bad news is, it takes longer than we want it to. It took three months of daily practice for the jugglers to show changes in grey matter. It’s probably going to take three months or more for us to make sort of permanent changes in our happiness level, to make those permanent adjustments upward in our happiness thermostat. But we can do it if we just hang in there.*

**Introduction:** So say my guest Dr. Richard O’Connor, author of *Happy At Last: The Thinking Person’s Guide to Finding Joy*. Richard O’Connor, MSW, Ph.D. is the author of *Happy At Last: The Thinking Person’s Guide to Finding Joy*, his earlier books are *Undoing Depression* and *Undoing Perpetual Stress*.

For 14 years, he was executive director of the Northwest Centre for Family Service and Mental Health, a private, non-profit mental health clinic serving Litchfield County, Connecticut, overseeing the work of 20 mental health professionals in treating almost a thousand patients per year. He is currently a practicing psychotherapist with offices in Connecticut and New York. Now, here’s the interview.

**Dr. Dave:** Dr. Richard O’Connor, welcome to Shrink Rap Radio.

**Dr. Richard:** David it’s a pleasure to be here.

**Dr. Dave:** Well let me say at the outset, I love your book. I’ve been reading quite a few books lately on the topic of happiness and I think yours is going to be a keeper.

**Dr. Richard:** Oh, thank you very much. I am glad you feel that way.

**Dr. Dave:** Yeah, very much so. Now before we get into the book though, tell us a bit about your background.

**Dr. Richard:** Well, I am a clinical social worker. I came to Connecticut about 25 years ago to be the director of a community mental health centre out here. And stayed in that position for 10 years and branch out into private practice and at the same time I published my first book which was *Undoing Depression*.

**Dr. Dave:** Well, let’s start even further back, where did you grow up? And where did you go to college? What did you major in?

**Dr. Richard:** I grew up in what is now the unhealthiest town in the country, I grew up in Huntington West Virginia, for the first 10 years of my life.

**Dr. Dave:** Uh-huh.

**Dr. Richard:** And we moved to Chicago and but I went to school out east here, Trinity College in Hartford, and you know, I'll tell you, mind as well broach the subject now, in my books I've been open about my own experience with depression.

**Dr. Dave:** Yes, that's one of the things that I really like about the book.

**Dr. Richard:** Yeah.

**Dr. Dave:** Something I can identify with as well myself.

**Dr. Richard:** Yeah, okay. Well, my mother had committed suicide when I was in high school. And ...

**Dr. Dave:** Oh, my goodness.

**Dr. Richard:** ... and I was foolish enough to think that it wasn't having much effect on me. But when I got to college, I didn't do well. I ...

**Dr. Dave:** Not too surprising, given what is going on.

**Dr. Richard:** ... Yeah, well I ... you know, I devoted myself to social life and drinking too much.

**Dr. Dave:** Hm-hum.

**Dr. Richard:** And — but graduated and went back to Chicago ... and ...

**Dr. Dave:** What did you major in during that period, even though you apply skipping class a lot at least so ... (laugh).

**Dr. Richard:** Oh, I major in English and then in my last year I switched to psychology.

**Dr. Dave:** Okay.

**Dr. Richard:** I love literature but in my last year, decided that I really couldn't go a long with the way it was being taught there.

**Dr. Dave:** Hu-huh.

**Dr. Richard:** And psychology was another love. So I graduated in psychology, went back to Chicago, went to work for Encyclopaedia Britannica of all things, as a copy editor for a few years, and got very depress, and got myself into therapy for the first time.

It was a — this was 1970, this was a ... I was seeing a married couple as therapist, they were doing Eric Berne stuff, you know ... *Games People Play*?

**Dr. Dave:** Yes, yes.

**Dr. Richard:** But actually they were pretty helpful. And they really help me see I needed to set a direction for my life. And so I decided I would be interested in doing what they were doing, and being a therapist.

**Dr. Dave:** Yes, right.

**Dr. Richard:** So I got in to the MSW program at the University of Chicago, and did very well there compared to my college career, so well that they invited me to join the Ph.D. program which I did. Thought I might be an academic for a while but got turn up — turn off by academic politics and really by that time I started working in an outpatient mental health clinic and really liked it. So that's what I continued to do for about 20 years, 25 years until I just went into private practice on my own.

**Dr. Dave:** Okay, thanks for taking us on that earlier journey. I think it sets an important backdrop.

**Dr. Richard:** And I should say also I think, you know, during that time I've had a couple of episode of major depression and much of my life is been spent in sort of a state of mild depression and wrote three books about depression. Finally decided it was time to advance a little beyond that (laugh).

**Dr. Dave:** (Laugh).

**Dr. Richard:** And you know all my books are primarily for me in the first place. So I decided to write about happiness, and I think the act of writing about it has really helped me, I hope it helps other people too because I found some ideas that were really quite, really had made a difference in my life. And ...

**Dr. Dave:** Well, I think that's one of the reasons why the book speaks so strongly to me is that is so clearly rooted in your own quest, your own experience and you put enough of that in there to kind of give the feeling like "Oh, there's a human being on the other end of this book."

**Dr. Richard:** Uh.

**Dr. Dave:** Yeah (laugh) which is always helpful. I can't help but notice that there seems to be an explosion people researching, talking about and writing about happiness. As a matter of fact, I just got back from attending a four day conference in San Francisco on *Happiness and It's Causes*, you weren't by any chance (laugh) were you?

**Dr. Richard:** No, I wasn't. I wish I could've been but ...

**Dr. Dave:** Yeah, you really would have like it.

**Dr. Richard:** I wasn't on that mailing list (laugh).

**Dr. Dave:** (laugh) Yeah, you would have liked it. And it was sponsored by a Tibetan Buddhist group, but they drew upon academics and just a very wide variety of perspective and so it's very interesting. And I've interviewed a number of people in the positive psychology movement and it makes me step back and wonder if some things going on

almost as an art type of level, you know, why so much about happiness at this particular point in time. Do you have a take on that by any chance?

**Dr. Richard:** Well, I did absorb a lot of my social worker training so I think that there are a lot of social factors involve. You can — sociologists had been asking Americans the same question about how happy there are in exactly the same way for the past 50 years. Just rating at your happiness on the scale from one to five, and over the past 50 years, every year, fewer and fewer people say they are very happy.

So it's really been a striking continual decline and I think that social factors play a major role. I think that we don't feel very safe anymore; we don't trust institutions, government, religion, education, friends and neighbours. We are working harder then we ever have and we're told that happiness comes from what we can buy, from buying the right things and wearing the right cloths. But we ... all of us tried that and experience that it really doesn't work. And then we're left sort of holding the bag and wondering, "Where do I go from here?"

**Dr. Dave:** I guess I was wondering, I am kind of speculating that maybe in the broad view of things, it's almost as if this happiness stuff has anticipated the hard times to come, you know, as we are going into this recession perhaps depression of — it's just interesting to me to note that there's been this big upsurge of work on happiness, kind of just prior to that.

**Dr. Richard:** Yeah. I think that quite possibly there is some sort of synergistic thing happening because I think all of us in one way or another are saying, "Happiness comes from simple things." Real happiness comes from relationships and pleasure and central pleasure and pride and self worth and things like that don't really depend on outward success.

**Dr. Dave:** Yes. Maybe we should start to drill down now and a place to start is with your definition of happiness.

**Dr. Richard:** Well my definition, I took from the academic researchers which is basically that happiness is a combination of joy, that is the immediate ability to feel good in the moment plus satisfaction, meaning a feeling that you have that you are okay with where you are in life right now, you've done most of the things that are really important to you. You're satisfied with your relationships and etcetera. So joy plus satisfaction minus misery and some misery is inevitable in life and but in my book I try to focus on unnecessary misery, the kind we do to ourselves and by reducing unnecessary misery we can increase our happiness.

**Dr. Dave:** Yes.

**Dr. Richard:** And there is a fourth factor that I refer to as meaning which the sociologist really can't research very well but it's obviously very important. I mean, in a feeling of that your life makes sense, that it has a sense of purpose that you belong to something bigger then yourself, that there is a god or a community or something that explain what it's all about for you.

**Dr. Dave:** Right, right. I am thinking in terms of traditional psychological constructs. They talk about state versus trait and from what you've just said is clearly that happiness has aspect of both that their state aspect which you characterize as joy and trait. In one of the things about ...

**Dr. Richard:** That's right, but wait, wait, let me say. In one of my major points is that I think that all the new brain research is saying that we can change our trait happiness as well. I think all of us are born with a little thermostat that sort of keeps putting us back to our normal state of on the happiness-unhappiness scale. We had sort of an average.

**Dr. Dave:** Yeah, they call that the set point right?

**Dr. Richard:** The set point.

**Dr. Dave:** Yeah.

**Dr. Richard:** But I think that there is increasing evidence that we can affect the set point through practicing mindfulness meditation, through practicing mindful living, through gaining greater self-control, through some of the positive psychology exercises of just paying more attention to joy.

**Dr. Dave:** Yeah, I think you're right. You know, I think something that you and I share in common is that we are both genetically gifted with a set point that maybe is a bit left-of-centre and ...

**Dr. Richard:** Yeah, on the low side.

**Dr. Dave:** Yeah, on the low side and it's certainly I'm being working at raising mine; it sounds like you've been working at raising yours and with some success it sounds like.

**Dr. Richard:** Yes, yes. Yeah, I think personal, I think I've met with some success, I feel with the past few year or so I feel much more attentive to my life's circumstances and just, you know, the small pleasures and the small beauty that are going on around me all the time. We just got back from a drive through the woods, and you know its November and the leaves are all down and stark, especially pretty, but in the November light you get to see, you get to see things in the woods that you don't ordinarily see because the underbrush is all gone. So you can see all the stone walls that the farmers put up 200 years ago, that are no longer in use. There is beauty in ... even in a winter day like this.

**Dr. Dave:** Oh yes. I taught for two years at the University of New Hampshire and I miss those New England seasonal changes. Is just hearing you talk about it kind of brings it back. One the phrases in your book that I really like that and you started to talk about this but maybe you can just kind of emphasize it again, you say, "Happiness is smaller than we think."

**Dr. Richard:** Yeah I think we are sort of conditioned to believe that happiness comes from achieving great things or making a whole lot of money.

**Dr. Dave:** Yeah.

**Dr. Richard:** Or marrying a trophy wife for a spouse or having our children get into Harvard or all those kinds of things. But you know, here is the odd thing, we have this belief in ourselves that I will be happy if I get what I want. But all the social psychology research and if you look, really look at your own experience, you'll see this is true. If you get what you want, you will only want something else very soon. You don't get to stay happy if you get what you want.

**Dr. Dave:** Right, right.

**Dr. Richard:** Staying happy comes from ... one thing it comes from is by paying attention to small things. By allowing yourselves to savor pleasurable events, my example I use a couple of times in the book is a really good grilled cheese sandwich can make your day, if you are sufficiently paying attention.

**Dr. Dave:** Hu-huh, yes. Yes so this sort of endless wanting that we have, that positive psychologists, and you use this term in your book, they call it the hedonic treadmill.

**Dr. Richard:** Yes.

**Dr. Dave:** And of course Buddhist talk about it. It's one of the ...

**Dr. Richard:** Right, craving.

**Dr. Dave:** Yeah, that kind of endless desire. And desire is the source of suffering.

**Dr. Richard:** Yes.

**Dr. Dave:** It's interesting to me that from these two very different directions they are arriving at a similar conclusion.

**Dr. Richard:** Yeah. Well I think that we're going to find out from the brain too. I think that there is more than a hint that it's the dopamine system involve here that's something to do with cocaine and other drugs of abuse that turns on the dopamine circuit that makes us want more and more and more. And convince us that if we get what we want we'll be happy but it just doesn't work out that way.

**Dr. Dave:** Yeah. Many people think of happiness as a matter of chance or luck but view emerging from research is that it's more of a learnable skill; maybe you could talk about that a bit.

**Dr. Richard:** Yes. Well I think maintaining happiness is a learnable skill. I think that unless you're clinical depressed, most of us can feel happy when a good thing happens. But it doesn't last and we return to that the term of static setting that's individual for each of us. But it is possible to reset that point through — you know I'm sorry, I forgot where I was going with this question (laugh), refresh my memory please?

**Dr. Dave:** Yeah, we are talking about happiness is a matter of chance or luck ...

**Dr. Richard:** Oh, chance.

**Dr. Dave:** ... and that is a learnable skill instead.

**Dr. Richard:** No, it's ... yeah, certainly good luck makes people happier than bad luck does, but even if you have good luck, it doesn't last. The famous study of lottery victims that — lottery winners are excellent victims, a year later found that both groups has sort of return to their own individual set point of happiness. So if you were fairly satisfied person who happen to have an accident and become disable, you are still — a year later — you are still feeling pretty good about your life and if you are a fairly miserable person and you won the lottery you are just a rich miserable person.

**Dr. Dave:** Yeah.

**Dr. Richard:** So it is something that you learn by partly by paying attention, partly by being mindful, you know you increase satisfaction in your life by making the right decisions, making the right choices and there are certainly ways of learning how to think and how to make decisions that are more productive than other ways are. And that's not only psychology, it's just empiricisms.

**Dr. Dave:** Yes.

**Dr. Richard:** Apparently. And people can learn that. It's too bad it's never taught in school but it's not that hard to learn.

**Dr. Dave:** Yeah, for example one of the examples that you give I think is on relation to consumerism and are sort of eternal desiring, wanting, it is to, you know, you pointed out that you can be, you can either get rich by earning a lot more money or by wanting a lot less (laugh).

**Dr. Richard:** Right, yes.

**Dr. Dave:** And it seem ...

**Dr. Richard:** Which is easier?

**Dr. Dave:** Yeah, which is easier? (laugh)

**Dr. Richard:** (laugh)

**Dr. Dave:** For some people it's easier to earn a lot of money I guess, but ...

**Dr. Richard:** It is and it's sort of swimming upstream in America to try to be satisfied with less, but I think that the recession may force more and more people into adopting that as a strategy.

**Dr. Dave:** Yeah, I think that may be a bit of a silver lining in the recession. And certainly in my own experience, I have the experience — I've had a reasonably long life at this point and gone through lots of things that where I really want something, really coveted having a certain computer or certain gadget or something. And the satisfaction, so many times, has been short lived, you know ...

**Dr. Richard:** Yes.

**Dr. Dave:** There are lots of things that I've bought where I realize that these just didn't bring that much satisfaction or pleasure. So I've reach the point in my life where I can have that dialog ahead of time and kind of access, put it in a more realistic perspective, "Do I really need this?" "Is this going to bring a lot of happiness and satisfaction? Or a week later will it just be sort of sitting in the corner unused."

**Dr. Richard:** And it's a great joy to make that kind of decision. It's a really — it gives you a rosy glow inside to go shopping and decide there's nothing you need.

**Dr. Dave:** Yeah, yeah. This whole round of Christmas thing is a little distressing in that regard because not everybody in my family is at the same place here, in terms of this realization. There are all this expectations around giving and receiving etcetera.

**Dr. Richard:** Well it is better to give. I think a great deal of pleasure comes from, quite curiously from seeing the pleasure on other people's faces when we can give them something that's personally meaningful.

**Dr. Dave:** Yes.

**Dr. Richard:** I think that unfortunately, too often we're tempted to give them something that it's just a fancy trinket that as you say there're going to lose interest in a couple of weeks and that makes it all seem sort of empty.

**Dr. Dave:** Yes. There is a term that you use in the book; it's a Greek term that was fairly new to me. I heard it before but this is the first place I've seen it written down and it might be new for my listeners, is eudaimonia, spelled e-u-d-a-i-m-o-n-i-a. Tell us about eudaimonia and where that concept comes from.

**Dr. Richard:** Well that's a Greek term; it's not coming back to me immediately.

**Dr. Dave:** Yeah (laugh). Well, I co-authored a book and there's a lot (laugh) I can't remember, it's like, you know, it's out sight out of mind. And I'm just pulling it out in your book here, it's on page 15. I'll refresh your memory here, it's says, "The other theory of happiness is refer to as eudaimonia, living in accordance with ones —"

**Dr. Richard:** Oh, it's eudaimonia versus heathenism, of course.

**Dr. Dave:** Yeah, yeah.

**Dr. Richard:** Sort of ...

**Dr. Dave:** And you said it's credited to Aristotle. So it goes all the way back to the Greeks, the kind of insights that we've been talking about here.

**Dr. Richard:** Yeah. And I argue later in the book that the positive psychologists are really promoting eudaimonia, the feeling that you are living up to your best self. And Oprah talks about this a lot too right? Being your best self? Positive psychology likes to talk about finding your own character strength and making the most of them.



**Dr. Dave:** Yes.

**Dr. Richard:** I wanted to set that up as sort of draw a man to knockdown a little bit because it's often contrast with heathenism, the simple pursuit of pleasure. And I wanted to make the point that, there's nothing wrong heathenism either as long as it's doesn't go too far and that heathenism has been the principle on which the enlightenment was based on, on which our society was based on. It's the basis for lock and mill, to try to do the greatest good for the greatest number of people that's enlighten heathenism.

So I think that my problem with positive psychology is that it neglects simple pleasure a little bit and talks about building good character. And nothing wrong with building good character, I mean, you have to do it if you want to be happy. But I think it's also very appropriate to emphasise pleasure too.

And then they have a great exercise, this wonderful exercise about when you go to sleep at night, just mentally review three good things that happen during the day. Three things that brought a smile to your face or a sense of satisfaction and they can be anything from, your daughter gets into college or you had a really good grilled cheese sandwich or you smile at somebody on the street or had a great dinner. The finding is that if you really sort of focus your brain on those things as you go to sleep, you wake up in a better mood in the morning and the mood seems to last during the day.

**Dr. Dave:** Yeah, I agree with you that that is a very powerful exercise. It's actually one that I would swear my office maid at the university told me about doing that what ... 20 years ago or longer. He now ...

**Dr. Richard:** My wife told me about doing it and she came from her Jewish mother.

**Dr. Dave:** Interesting.

**Dr. Richard:** I think its being around.

**Dr. Dave:** Yeah. And my office maid, I told him about this that this is one of greatest gifts that he ever gave me because it's kind of stuck with me and I practise it from time to time never in a thoroughly discipline way but when I do remember to do it, it's wonderful. He doesn't even ever remember (laugh) telling me that.

**Dr. Richard:** (laugh)

**Dr. Dave:** It was a new concept to him which I'm ...

**Dr. Richard:** Oh, he forgot about it.

**Dr. Dave:** He did, he did. I know he's the one that I got it from. And anytime I thought to do it, even the most mundane day, if you take the time at the end of the day and say, "Okay, well what happen today that I could be grateful for?" No matter how mundane the day you can always find particular, little interpersonal interactions, you know, somebody smile at me or my kids said something nice to me.

**Dr. Richard:** Right, right.

**Dr. Dave:** Yeah.

**Dr. Richard:** And that of course that's what people with depression have the most trouble with. It's because their mind seems to be so dominated by negative thoughts in all things that went wrong and all the things that they did wrong and all the things that they feel guilty about. And that they really have to learn this as a skill to be practise day after day. But they can learn. It really just takes repetition.

**Dr. Dave:** Well that's one of things that I wanted to ask you about, because you've gone through depression, that's been a big issue in your life. You've written two books on it and so I am wondering how this positive psychology happiness work that you have uncovered, how that impacts your clinical practice.

**Dr. Richard:** Yeah, I think it has impacted greatly. One thing I realize is that most of my depress patients set their too low. When they come in, they desire above all, they desire to get back to normal, cause they're feeling out of control with their lives, they are feeling like something has happen that they don't understand and they have to get back to normal. But normal for them is really pretty low standard. They don't know what it is to feel good; they don't know what it is to feel happy. So I think it's — I am now spending more time with people, encouraging them to go on further, beyond just simply not feeling symptomatic anymore but feeling good about themselves and feeling like their making something of their lives and feeling some pleasure.

**Dr. Dave:** How do you do that? How do you approach that?

**Dr. Richard:** Well, timing is everything. You can't — some one who is sitting in your office in great distress, week after week, year after year, you can't really say to them, "You know you probably feel a lot better if you just got up and went for a walk right now." But you have to plant that seed, so that they will start thinking about it. So I get pretty directive in my therapy and I really encourage people to practise some of the exercises in my books, to exercise as much as possible because it really has been shown to be as effective as an antidepressant. To get out and socialize, to set goals for themselves and try to achieve those goals, I think Tal Ben-Shahar, another happiness writer, makes this great point that, he says, "First of all, depression can be define as the absence of goals." He also says that, "Even if we don't achieve our goals, they've done something for us. They've focus our lives, they've given us a purpose for awhile and they moved us off the dime, they've taken us somewhere different from where we started. And we are generally so adaptable that even if we don't quite achieve what we thought we wanted, we've gotten to some place better and we may be very satisfied with that."

**Dr. Dave:** Yes, and that ... a sort of that old wisdom that is the process is more important then the goal or the process is more important then arriving.

**Dr. Richard:** Right.

**Dr. Dave:** There's been a real explosion ...

**Dr. Richard:** The journey not the arrival matters.

**Dr. Dave:** Yeah. And you've mentioned mindfulness several times in our discussion and it's really a centre piece of your book is mindfulness meditation and as one of at least three major strategies that you've talked about. There's been a real explosion of interest in that approach. Do you consider yourself a Buddhist?

**Dr. Richard:** No and I don't practice meditation nearly as much as I want to. But I have become more mindful just by writing and thinking and talking with my patients about the process. And I hope I — one of my goals, right now I am in the middle of doing a revision of *Undoing Depression*. But as soon as that's done, I want to get back to practicing mindfulness meditation everyday. One of the things that I have observe whenever I try to meditate is how automatically I start judging things and I think this is true for a great many people. You quickly start judging the meditation experience, your mind gets fill of thoughts of "I am not doing this right," "This is uncomfortable," "I am not going to last the ½ hour," "What do I have to do as soon as this is done?"

**Dr. Dave:** (laugh) I've been there, I know what you are talking about.

**Dr. Richard:** Yeah. And I think that's all the judging mind that work and I think once you begin to be aware that there is this voice inside of you that's constantly evaluating your experience negatively, you can begin to distance yourselves from it a little bit. I liken it to the Three Stooges in the book; I call it the inner Moe. Just as a way of poking fun at it. Cause all this really negative, harsh, critical view point of ourselves cannot be possibly be accurate, it's a mental habit, it's just a habit.

**Dr. Dave:** Yes.

**Dr. Richard:** And we can unlearn it.

**Dr. Dave:** That's right, I guess there are two kind of mindfulness, one is the formal sitting discipline of meditation and then the other is just as you pointed out during the course of the day, we can become more aware of those voices in our head, the ones that say negative things to us, the ways in which we judge ourselves or judge other people.

**Dr. Richard:** Right. It's the same thing as score card in a behavioural therapy. It's been teaching for years except in my opinion you don't have to counter those negative thoughts with positive counter arguments. I think you just have to learn to distance yourselves from them and to see them as just a voice in your brain that's maybe your critical father or the school yard bully or something that you created out of scrapes of this person and that person and realize that nobody is as harsh you on you as you are yourself.

**Dr. Dave:** Yeah. One of the things that — not one of things but sort of a thread in the book, you talk about sources of unhappiness and there are psychological sources as you say, maybe a bully when you are a kid, you kind of touch on the source some of Freudian ideas and that are due to trauma or defence mechanisms that we've developed, that these can be a source of unhappiness.

**Dr. Richard:** Yeah.

**Dr. Dave:** And then you point a finger at the way our society is structure as also a major source of unhappiness.

**Dr. Richard:** Uh-huh.

**Dr. Dave:** You call it contemporary insanity.

**Dr. Richard:** Yes.

**Dr. Dave:** Yeah (laugh). Talk a little bit about contemporary insanity. You've touch on a little bit but say a little bit more.

**Dr. Richard:** I don't think most people realize that this is all pre-current economic crisis but as of January last year for instance, we were working 25 percent more hours then we were working 25 years ago and our earning power had stayed stagnant. We were running harder then ever just to stay in one place. We were working harder then any country in the world including the Japanese. Remember we used to make fun of the poor salary men, they were exploited by their employers and now it turns out we're working harder then they are.

**Dr. Dave:** Now they are us.

**Dr. Richard:** You are right, right. We are them.

**Dr. Dave:** Yes.

**Dr. Richard:** And now both parents in the family are working and there's no time for the children, somehow I certainly was behind the feminim strait of evolution but somehow we didn't take into account that what it would mean to have both parents out of the house and the kids having no structure except for these pitiful afterschool programs that they've got. So kids are growing up unparented, we're working harder then ever, we are guided — we're living our lives mindlessly, guided by our "to do lists," guided by "what's next?" The next chore we have to tick off our list and we can go on for 20 or 30 years that way and never wakeup and see what life is like around us. And that's a shame. I think the fact is most don't go on that way, they can't because they have some sort of crisis, they have some sort of stress related meltdown and they ... go through ... it may manifest itself as physical zit or anxiety or depression or drug abuse or implosive decisions like a sudden divorce or telling the boss off and getting yourself fire. I think these are all different kind of reaction to cumulative stress. So it is a culture of insanity, it's not what we were design for.

**Dr. Dave:** Yeah.

**Dr. Richard:** You know up until 300 years ago, society hadn't change much for 30,000 years ... we've ... 300 years ago people still live in small villages, didn't have clocks, knew everybody they were ever going to come in contact with and work only a few hours a day and work in a variety of things throughout the year. Nobody was expected to go to work from 9 to 5 everyday in a artificial way and do the same repetitive task all the time, that's something very new in the world and it's very difficult for us to adjust to and I think it's the cause of much suffering.

**Dr. Dave:** Hh-hmm. Yes. Well as we wrap up here (laugh)

**Dr. Richard:** Hmm. Okay.

**Dr. Dave:** Let's end on a more positive, happier note if we can (laugh). Are there any ideas that you'd like to leave our audience with?

**Dr. Richard:** Well I think that's the really good news about the new brain science is that we can change our brains. We can through focus, attention and practice. Unfortunately we can't seem to change our brain very much just by thinking about it but by practicing and learning new skills and I — you know in the book, I keep using the example of the college students who were taught to juggle, and the researcher who could actually see visible growth in grey matter in their brains, after three months of daily juggling practice. So the good news is we can change our own brains if we practice living mindfully, if we practice thinking of three good things at night, if we practice making wiser decisions. The bad news is it takes longer than we wanted to. It took three months of daily practice for the jugglers to show changes in grey matter, it's probably going to take three months or more for us to make a sort of permanent changes in our happiness level, to make those permanent adjustments upward in our happiness thermostat. But we can do it if we just hang in there, if we just remind ourselves that everyday of practice means a little bit of change.

**Dr. Dave:** Oh that is a great reminder. I've enjoy speaking with you Richard.

**Dr. Richard:** Right, so have I, it's been a pleasure.

**Dr. Dave:** Yeah. Dr. Richard O'Connor thanks so much for being my guest on Shrink Rap Radio.

**Dr. Richard:** Well thank you David.