

## #297 - Engineering Happiness with Rakesh Sarin, Ph.D.

David Van Nuys, Ph.D., aka Dr. Dave interviews Dr. Rakesh Sarin

**Introduction:** My guest today is Dr. Rakesh Sarin, UCLA management professor and co-author of the book *Engineering Happiness: A New Approach for Building a Joyful Life*. To learn more about Dr. Sarin, please consult our show notes at [shrinkrapradio.com](http://shrinkrapradio.com).

Now here's the interview.

**Dr. Dave:** Dr. Rakesh Sarin, welcome to Shrink Rap Radio.

**Sarin:** Thank you, Dave. It is a pleasure to be here with you today.

**Dr. Dave:** Well, it's a pleasure for me especially because I've been reading and enjoying your book *Engineering Happiness: A New Approach for Building a Joyful Life*, which you co-authored with Manel Baucells. Am I saying his name correctly?

**Sarin:** That's correct.

**Dr. Dave:** Yeah, and your book is delightful and provocative. One of the most provocative things about it is that it's written by two engineers.

**Sarin:** Right. (chuckles)

**Dr. Dave:** As you know there's been a rash of books on happiness since Martin Seligman's announcement of the field of positive psychology back in 1998 and most of those books have been written by psychologists. So it's somehow shocking to find two engineers weighing in on this topic and I like the way you put it in your preface where you say, "Perhaps you're thinking, what can two pointy-headed math geeks possibly teach me about happiness." (chuckles)

**Sarin:** (chuckles)

**Dr. Dave:** So indeed what's your answer to that question?

**Sarin:** OK, Dave, you know Manel and I have been working for a long time on what we call decision analysis; why people choose A. over B. Apparently, people choose A. over B. because A. makes

them happier than B. would. We started thinking what are the mechanisms that trigger happiness in people. We said that ingenious has built all these wonderful things. The skyscrapers, airplanes, iPhones and could we use a similar approach, which is quantifying things, organizing all the facts and empirical data and come up with some laws that guide our happiness.

In this book, we put together over ten years of research and we are able to say that, yes, there are some systematic ways by which happiness is created or destroyed or maintained. I'm happy to talk to you about those.

**Dr. Dave:** Yeah and we're going to get into that. And parenthetically, I should let you know that I had originally planned to be an engineer myself.

**Sarin:** Oh, good. (chuckles)

**Dr. Dave:** Yeah, I was accepted into the University of Pennsylvania into an electrical engineering program but I switched out -- (chuckles)

**Sarin:** Right.

**Dr. Dave:** -- after not too long. And also I am very interested in that whole field of decision -- how did you describe it?

**Sarin:** Decision analysis.

**Dr. Dave:** Decision analysis. I interviewed another of your, I guess, countrymen would be the right way, Sheena Iyengar.

**Sarin:** Right.

**Dr. Dave:** I'm sure you're aware of her work.

**Sarin:** Right. Yes, I am.

**Dr. Dave:** And also the Israeli guy whose name I'm blocking on now.

**Sarin:** Maybe Dan Ariely?

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

**Sarin:** Yes, it is a big community and we all work on very similar problems but we have a little different take. Some of the people like, Sheena and Dan, they look at a lot of empirical data and Manel and I try to build to it. We look at the data and try to organize it with some guiding principles and use more mathematical things even though the book is written for the general public. It has no mathematics but the idea that comes to us comes out of mathematics.

**Dr. Dave:** Yes, no potential readers should be scared away.

**Sarin:** No, no. (chuckles)

**Dr. Dave:** Because it's a very readable book.

**Sarin:** Right. It has a lot of stories and examples on how we can choose to be happy.

**Dr. Dave:** Yes. Speaking of choice, I was struck by the assertion that and again quotes, "The very essence of attaining a happier life is choice." That's a point of view that would be fundamental to existential philosophy of psychology and not necessarily what I'd expect in a chapter titled, "The Science of Happiness." I was surprised to encounter that because I happen to believe choice is very important as well.

**Sarin:** Right, right. Basic point, Dave, that we have is you could have two views of life. One is what I could say is a pendulum that means some days we are happy and some days we are not happy but we have a set point and ultimately it comes back to the same thing. There is some truth to it. In fact, one scientist did say that trying to be happier is as futile as trying to be taller and therefore, it is counterproductive.

We have a different view. We feel that happiness is more like a sailboat. Yes, ocean currents and the wind influences the sailboat but you have the control of the rudder and you can guide it to some (INAUDIBLE). We are relatively strong on this point that regardless of your circumstances, regardless of where you are in the world, where you are in your life, you can choose to be happy.

By choice we mean, not suddenly saying let me be happy today even though that could help but really make certain life choices, certain choices about how you think about the world, how you

examine your own inner life and those choices would make you happy. Happiness is not some kind of a destination. It is more like organizing of a life so that we have more happier and more positive state of minds and less negative thoughts and less negative states of mind. That's what it is for us.

**Dr. Dave:** Yeah, and you say that happiness is not a destination and I have the impression that in fact, it might be a mistake to focus on happiness per se --

**Sarin:** Right.

**Dr. Dave:** -- rather than on some other things that as a by-product happen to produce happiness.

**Sarin:** You are totally right. That's what we believe. That we make certain choices and those choices, the by-product, will be happiness and we will talk about some of those as we go on but that's right. It is not a direct thing. It is not just controlled thermostat and put it on higher happiness. (chuckles)

**Dr. Dave:** Right.

**Sarin:** It is an indirect, a by-product, of the way we live our life.

**Dr. Dave:** Yes. Now you point out that your co-author was raised in Spain as a Catholic and you grew up in India as a Hindu --

**Sarin:** Yes.

**Dr. Dave:** -- yet the two of you are persuaded that there are universal principles that govern happiness even from two people from such disparate cultures.

**Sarin:** Yes, yes.

**Dr. Dave:** Say a little bit about that. We'll get into your laws later but just say a little bit --

**Sarin:** Right. The basic thing is that what we feel is that ultimately all human beings have emotions, feelings, states of mind and to us happiness is simply the sum total of positive and negative emotions and states of mind. Even though the background -- certain things could be a little more hurtful in one culture than other but

nevertheless, fundamentally we are very similar. Similar things give us joy when we spend time with friends, whether you are from the U.S. or India or Spain, you enjoy it. If some bad things happen in life, it hurts wherever you are from. So, yes, certain triggers of happiness may be somewhat different for different cultures but the basic mechanisms are very similar because all human beings at that level are very alike.

**Dr. Dave:** OK. Now science is all about measurement, control and prediction so it's fitting that you start off talking about measuring happiness and you outline six approaches to measuring happiness. Maybe we can kind of step through those six approaches because it's so fundamental to the whole discussion.

**Sarin:** Right. There is a lot of progress in measuring happiness because at first blush it seems like how could we -- happiness is some internal state of a person, how could we ever measure it? But scientists have made a lot of progress -- psychologists, economists and now even neuroscientists on measuring happiness. I would say that it is still not as precise as measuring your height and weight but we can get very good, very good data.

The approaches we describe really are our analysis of literature and what people have used.

**Dr. Dave:** Mm-hmm.

**Sarin:** Perhaps the most popular approach because it's easier is simply to ask people, let's say on a zero to ten-point scale, how happy they are with their lives. But some other people have come up with more elaborate scales to measure happiness. Asking people is one way.

The other way is to look at the expedience utility. So this is Csíkszentmihályi, where basically you tell the experimenter how happy you are feeling or how anxious you are or how stressed out you are or how cheerful you are and they will take all that information and combine it into a scale. So that is another method and that method is particularly good because it does not depend on the recall or the projection because we are neither very good in recalling nor are we very good in projecting. We are very good in telling people how we are feeling right now.

For example, I am having a good time having conversation with you then my happiness -- we call it happy dance -- will be nine points. And, if suppose at some other point during the day, I get an annoying e-mail, then it may be five or six. You see it fluctuates over time. Expedient sampling method tries to measure that. People have done studies of diaries. They look at some extreme measures like suicide rates. They look at body measurements.

Now the new technique that has been pioneered by neuroscientists is neuroimaging. Basically, they look at the activity in our prefrontal cortex on the left side and the right side. Basically, what it is is if the left side is more active, then we are cheerful. If the right side is more active, then we are not so cheerful or maybe even depressed. That measure which Davidson, that neuroscientist, used to study monks.

**Dr. Dave:** Yeah, Richie Davidson. I've also interviewed him.

**Sarin:** Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm.

**Dr. Dave:** Yeah, go ahead though.

**Sarin:** So he has studied monks and other people and some day there may be handheld devices that are measuring happiness off of people on some continuous basis like we can measure blood pressure. It fluctuates during the day but we can measure it and happiness similarly can be measured.

**Dr. Dave:** Yeah, I thought that was one of the most intriguing propositions because I am a big iPhone user and advocate and so it certainly is possible -- the iPhone can do so much already.

**Sarin:** Right.

**Dr. Dave:** It doesn't seem like it's that big a jump to think that well, maybe you could have Bluetooth set on your scalp and it would measure the differential between the signals.

**Sarin:** Right, right. That day is not very far but until then we have millions of pieces of data from all over the world that researchers have collected so we know a lot about what makes people happy, what makes people unhappy and what circumstances people are happier and what circumstances they are not so happy.

Our point was that all this information is a bit haphazard and disorganized. Our laws of happiness is our way of organizing all of the information and then concluding what are the mechanism that give rise to happiness.

Anyway you could say there is not so much new frankly in our book. What is new is this organizing principle and once you begin to think like that, you see lots of opportunities to improve your happiness.

**Dr. Dave:** Yes, in fact, that was my impression as well that I was reading a very well organized summary of the findings of positive psychology and it was very useful at that level.

I suppose before we go any further in our discussion, I should ask you, you know, and maybe you already said this actually earlier but we can just say it again. Your definition of happiness, so that people understand as we discuss this, just what you mean when you say happiness?

**Sarin:** Our definition is that it is the total sum over time of momentary emotions, feelings and states of mind. To us happiness is not some mysterious concept. It is basically trying to see most of the time we want to be happy and fewer occasions we want to have negative feelings or states of mind. It is simply the total sum of pleasure minus pain, if you want to put it that way. But, of course, most of the time it is not pleasure and pain, it is about our state of mind, our feelings, our emotions so it is simply the total sum.

If you want to improve the total sum of happiness, then what you want to do is increase the frequency and duration of the positive and reduce the negative. It's as simple as that. But the question is what gives rise to these positive emotions or gives rise to these negative emotions and that's where loss comes in.

**Dave:** Well, it seems to me that some people might think that that was too simplistic a definition and the example that comes to mind is -- people may be engaged in certain forms of let's say political activism that are not necessarily pleasurable in the hedonistic sense --

**Sarin:** Right.

**Dr. Dave:** -- but are very meaningful. So they feel like they are having a fulfilling life even though they may be undergoing all sorts of privations and difficulties.

**Sarin:** Right. You see one cannot just so far look at a small slice of time when you are mainly asking a child to practice piano. The child may be frustrated. That experience, in itself for a short duration, may be somewhat stressful but if you look at the longer duration, then the same child, once it learns a skill, begins to appreciate playing piano and enjoys it.

So yes, you are right, the definition, if narrowly viewed, is simplistic but if we take an overall view -- we have a whole chapter called "Cumulative Goals On Seeing Meaning in Life," where we talk about these kinds of things that you are talking about -- setting goals, making progress towards goals whether they are political or they are environmental or they could be spiritual. Sometimes in the process of obtaining those goals, there are harder times. There are difficult times but nevertheless, if we view it as an accumulative goal, then overall, we come out ahead. Overall, we come out happier. We feel more satisfied.

I would say if you look at our entire book these issues of meaningfulness and we quote from Viktor Frankl in the cumulative chapter, who has emphasized this and Csíkszentmihályi who has emphasized flow idea. Of course, we see from daily life that we are engaged in something. It is not a pleasure of the kind like eating ice cream but we lose sense of time and that to us is happiness because we are have a positive state of mind and we are lost in things that we are enjoying.

**Dr. Dave:** Yes. Now you propose a set of six laws of happiness. I'll just enumerate them here: 1. Relative Comparison; 2. Motion of Expectation; 3. Aversion to Loss; 4. Diminishing Sensitivity; 5. Satiation; and 6. Presentism.

Let's step through these, if you will, one at a time and have you explain what you're getting at in each. Would that be OK?

**Sarin:** Yes, or we could take one or two and talk in length about it and see how they would apply to our life. Yes, we could do that.

**Dr. Dave:** OK, well let's see how it goes. I think we have plenty of time.



**Sarin:** (chuckles) Yes, OK, all right. For example, our first law which really is very simple and it is: "Happiness is Reality minus Expectations." Let me elaborate a little bit on that. If you look at our lives in developed countries like the United States, then compared to our ancestors, we have so much more -- running water, electricity, cars, roads -- so our happiness should be off the chart. We should be all amazingly happy.

**Dr. Dave:** Yes.

**Sarin:** If reality is the only thing that mattered -- reality means what we have -- but we have gotten accustomed to these privileges. Our equation is simply saying that happiness is not just dependent -- it's not absolute in terms of reality but it also depends on your expectations. Reality minus expectations defines that in a precise way. People kind of from common sense know that but its implications are very interesting. But, nevertheless, let me stay a little bit with reality minus expectations.

What determines expectations? One thing is the social comparison or peer group comparison -- now there is well-known research, which says that in the Olympics, bronze medalist are happier than silver medalist. Now if you think about it, the reality -- silver medalist is higher than bronze because silver medalist regret missing out on the gold [medal]. Expectation -- reality minus expectation and bronze medalists compare themselves with the rest of the field and are happy to win any medal at all.

**Dr. Dave:** They say at least I didn't come in last. (chuckles)

**Sarin:** (chuckles) Right, right. They have done a lot of research and collected a lot of data to show that. So happiness is reality minus expectation. In daily life we try to say that if we only had more money or a better car or a better house -- well, you see that improves reality and that is fine but remember that expectations also move up and then you could be exactly at the same level.

If I think of my own life when I was a junior in college, my friends and I, we were riding bicycles and we were heavy. Then upon graduation I bought a scooter and I got used to that and I was happy. When I came to UCLA as a Ph.D. student, I bought an old car for \$100 and that car actually, sometimes, refused to reverse. (chuckles)

**Dr. Dave:** (chuckles) Oh, boy.

**Sarin:** You can imagine how the parking was because knowing on the next date it may not do it but I was happy with that car actually. My girlfriend then is my wife now for over 30 years, right? (chuckles)

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

**Sarin:** In spite of that car. (chuckles)

**Dr. Dave:** (chuckles) Right. The first law is relative comparison so I assume that gets at not only comparing to your past states but also - there's always somebody who's got better, right? So that can dampen our happiness, right? If we're sort of at the top of the heap among the people that we know, we feel affluent and maybe we feel really good if we're at the bottom of the heap of people that we know, we don't feel so great.

**Sarin:** Right, right. You see what happens, Dave, is our expectations keep changing. Even if we reach the top of the heap, I have to give you it's a bit of an exaggeration, but as the philosopher, Bertrand Russell said, "If you desire glory, you will envy Napoleon." But Napoleon envied Caesar and Caesar envied Alexander and Alexander envied Hercules, who never existed.

Fame and fortune feels like we all feel that if we only had more money or if we were only more well known or higher on the heap, we will be happier. It does influence happiness but for a short while and again we come back to the same level. Really it requires more work than simply trying to improve the reality and we are for improving. We are in business schools. We are business school professors. We want people to improve their reality, advance in their jobs to do well but that alone is not going to bring happiness because we get used to that so we have to see some other ways to improve happiness.

**Dr. Dave:** Yes. The first two laws are relative comparison, motion of expectation and I think you've been speaking to both of those.

**Sarin:** Yes, because I'm combining the two (CROSSTALK). Some of these you started talking about the social comparison -- you know they have biological consequences. A study done at UCLA showed that with vervet monkeys, the dominant monkey had a higher level

of neurotransmitters serotonin that is associated with the positive feelings and when the monkey is removed from the cage, it's serotonin level falls and a new monkey becomes dominant and it's serotonin level increases.

Social comparisons was -- psychologist Festinger said that this is the way we evaluate how we are doing. It is normal to have social comparisons. What we are trying to say is that the toxic social comparison -- every time a Bentley or some better car comes next to you, you start saying if I had that car because you don't know if that guy sitting in that car is so happy himself. (chuckles)

**Dr. Dave:** No.

**Sarin:** So these kinds of unnecessary social comparisons are not good. Some social comparisons have to be there. They are just there. They are built in, built in, in whatever revolution. So the question is we have to manage these social comparisons.

**Dr. Dave:** Now your third law is aversion to loss and that probably doesn't need any explanation. It's pretty clear. Your fourth and fifth are -- the fourth is diminishing sensitivity and five is satiation. And in a way those sound similar to me.

**Sarin:** Right. Diminishing sensitivity and satiation are very similar. The idea in diminishing sensitivity is that each increment in income or in some other material possession does not give you the same amount, proportional amount of happiness, right?

For example, if you have \$100, let's say you win \$100 in the office raffle versus \$200. Going from \$100 to \$200 does not give you twice as much happiness so there is a diminishing sensitivity. Over time satiation -- what it means is that over time if -- easiest example is if we are having pizza every day, then on the fourth or fifth day we would not like it as much, right? (chuckles)

**Dr. Dave:** Right.

**Sarin:** But beyond just food, even in our daily life, sometimes it becomes routine. Relationships become routine and people take it for granted and this boredom and dullness sets in. The law of satiation basically says that there is a diminishing quality to these experiences and then we can get into how do we conquer the

effects of satiation by adding novelty, variety, surprises and things like that.

**Dr. Dave:** Yeah. Now your sixth law, I think, maybe, you invented a word. It's called "presentism."

**Sarin:** This law basically -- you know Daniel Gilbert has written a whole book --

**Dr. Dave:** Yes.

**Sarin:** -- on stumbling on happiness and it is really -- we were motivated to use this as a law from his work. There are other economists who have done work on this. The idea is that in projecting our future feelings, we overweigh our current feelings. If I feel I want to get a new car or a bigger house, and I have a smaller house now, then I overweigh how happy I will be once I get that bigger house. I fail to project that I will get adapted to it and happiness will be short lived.

Presentism basically says that -- you know the clearest example is that researchers have shown that when we go shopping we buy more for next weeks' groceries when we are hungry and we buy less when we are not hungry because we are projecting our hungry state into next week and we end up buying more.

That law -- the reason we made it law is because it's applied to live choices. It could create some life imbalance. We may emphasize certain things because we think those things will give us happiness when the fact is it is other sorts of things like relationships with friends and family, spiritual improvement -- those are the things that are going to give us happiness rather than acquisition of material goals.

Because of presentism this kind of imbalance could occur. Of course, it's a mathematical result but not in the book. In the book we describe it using stories and examples.

**Dr. Dave:** The word "presentism" makes me think of the -- of being in the present which, for example, Zen Buddhism, advocates that we live in the present. That we have a real tendency to be either fantasizing about future successes or disasters or dwelling upon past disasters and that the key to happiness is to be right here in the present, moment to moment. Is that part of what you're conveying in the work?

**Sarin:** No, no, not in this -- even though I agree with you that living in the present, as Buddhist teaching says, is a good thing for happiness but presentism here is used more as a -- if I were to use another word, frankly another word in scientific papers, in scientific journals -- we use a different word.

We use the words "projection bias" that means when we are making -- because all of our decisions are based on what will, what kind of happiness will they bring to us in the future and we make wrong decisions because we are not able to project our future feelings very well. The "presentism" word here is used for projection bias rather than the kind of living in the present that you are talking about because that one we favor. Whereas projection bias, it is just there so there is nothing to favor or not favor but one should be aware that because of that we could make wrong decisions. All the decisions we don't want to make.

**Dr. Dave:** Yeah, yeah. Now you and your co-author actually come up with a mathematical formula for happiness and I guess there is a rather simple version of the formula. What's that formula?

**Sarin:** Basically, the formula begins with "Reality minus Expectation." We add onto these issues of satiation and shifting expectations and social comparisons but really what comes out of it is that in our life and I'll give a few examples, we should use what we call a crescendo strategy, which is less to more.

Let's take a very simple example. Like if it is a vacation, then in the vacation we should try to see the more spectacular sights towards the end of the trip rather than in the beginning. And again, the reason is because if our expectations go up too quickly, then the subsequent sights we will not enjoy so much. In raising children, we should not give them too much too fast.

Even in organizations if you give some employees, it's not true for every group of employees, but call center service employees, more frequent promotions associated with achieving some well-defined goals, which will improve satisfaction.

Everyone will be familiar with karate where they actually use this crescendo strategy by awarding different colors of bands as students progress. But you see, more importantly, we feel that as a philosophy of life, you can work to organize the chapters in your

book of life in less to more manner. That is following crescendo strategy.

Even though, David, it is a mathematical result but one can support it by common sense that if expectations move and we consume way too much too soon, then our expectations will go up. It is hard to then keep up with it. We have to work even harder to continue to meet those expectations. We are not against occasional indulgence in something extravagant. That's OK, but not as a habit. We feel life should be organized in a less to more way and that's a clear result from these laws.

**Dr. Dave:** That's an interesting thing to contemplate and to think about how it would apply in different situations. There's some wisdom behind the notion we should eat dessert after the meal rather than before. (chuckles)

**Sarin:** (chuckles) Right. For some things, Dave, this is natural -- happens naturally, but for other things we just have to think about it a little bit and not rush to get for everything the newest model of iPad -- if you needed that it's find so it is not -- like for everything we are saying but for lots of things we have a tendency to acquire things too quickly and it keeps raising of our expectations and then nothing seems to be enough.

You know even the principle of frugality is consistent with it. Of course, politicians will say we shouldn't be too frugal because we want the economy to work and expand all our money but for personal happiness it is good to be managing these things.

**Dr. Dave:** Some people are going to wonder if it's realistic to think that something that is as complex as human happiness can submit to a mathematical formula.

**Sarin:** Right. I think that is a fair question but mathematical formula - - you see if you view it, mathematical formula, that you could input something and out comes some clear prescription and that will make you happy, yes, then I would say that the doubt is correct. But if you could use that mathematical idea and see what I can learn from it -- let's just stay with reality minus expectations that's reported down in a mathematical idea. Then why don't we look at the way to improve happiness is that -- why don't we look at those things in our life for which expectation does not change much or which are less susceptible to social comparison, right? Because if expectations do

not move too much, then we can improve our happiness by having that experience or consuming that good again and again.

What I would say is that basic goods, what we call as basic goods are the ones that are the treasures of happiness. Because for basic goods, we do not compare with other people. Easiest example, again, is the needs of the body, which is food. We enjoy our meal every day when we are hungry. But you see now I like my phone but I have gotten used to my cell phone so I don't say what a great thing it is. It is just a phone I am accustomed to.

Similarly, you have the needs of the mind and the needs of the heart. These are things like spending time with friends and family, listening to music we love and these are the sorts of things that give us happiness on a consistent basis.

Again, I would say it is not the equation. The equation is just a way of thinking about it that if our expectation moves, then if the adaptive goals would be better organized in a less to more way. If these are basic goals, then we begin to emphasize those basic goals in our life and put less emphasis on these adaptive and social comparisons and show off type of goals and activities. That would be the idea.

**Dr. Dave:** I would think that the real utility of a mathematical approach might not be as much on the individual level as in maybe helping to drive public policy just as economics can be very, very, mathematical and is used in public policy. Of course, the example of Bhutan and their measure of -- what is -- gross domestic happiness or net -- I forget --

**Sarin:** Um-hmm. Gross national happiness.

**Dr. Dave:** Gross national happiness -- is that what would be your hope of how a mathematical approach would be used?

**Sarin:** What I would say is in public policy it is useful but frankly, I would also say that even individual -- not so much the mathematics of it but the organizing principle one could use and say OK, now this equation is telling me that if I try to go more for money, which means I have to work harder, and for fame, which is I want to do better than my peers. Some of those are desirable things.

We are not against those but excessive emphasis on that then the equation is telling me that my expectations -- I be forewarned and my expectations will also shift and the net result may not be there. Or if I went too far in these achievements of professional and material goals, maybe I will look back and feel that I did not live a good life.

In fact, I can quote to you from a very well-known scientist. His name is Chandrasekhar and this is --- he went on to express discontent with his life despite his extraordinarily successful career. Regret that he had imposed his obsessional lifestyle on his life and chagrin that his life has been so one sided, so lonely, so inescapable. Now see it is sobering to hear such discontent from a Nobel laureate whose achievements are so celebrated that his name graces a space satellite.

The point is that this trade off between personal and professional life and we are not saying what is the right trade off for an individual. If somebody wants to be all the time in the lab and do that that's good, if that's what you want to do. But (INAUDIBLE) Chandrasekhar was not happy and it just happened to him. That is because we are not proactive in our choices; we are reactive. Life is like a river with many branches. It will just take us to the main floor and the main floor tends to be in the direction of our jobs and our careers at the expense of personal life; that apparently happened to him.

Proper balance, once in a while being proactive about our choice -- what is it we want to do? What kind of life do we want to lead? This would be different for different people. Emphasis on the professional side, personal side, on community activity side, hobbies would be different for different people. The point we are making is that if you do not think about it, you might end up going too far in one direction.

**Dr. Dave:** You talk about happiness traps and happiness triggers. Maybe that's what you are getting at now. What are some of the happiness traps and the happiness triggers?

**Sarin:** The biggest happiness trap is over emphasis on peer group comparison, social comparison and trying to go for adaptive goals, not realizing that the happiness that we get from these material goods is short lived.



Happiness trigger is, basically, if you look at the research, that the single most important factor in happiness is the time spent with friends and family and pursuing some hobby or pursuing your passion. Those are the things that make people happy. In the cumulative good chapter, Dave, we talk a strategy in which you begin to see reality in a different way. There is no one truth out there. We have a choice in interpreting the reality.

There is a well-known parable where a traveller comes across a group of hard at work stonemasons. Let's say one stonemason is John and he tells the traveller that I'm constructing a wall. The other one is Paul and Paul says, "I'm building a cathedral." Now Paul sees a greater purpose and meaning in his daily work. Reality is the same. Paul, too, is sanding his stone or digging a foundation or constructing a wall but he sees a greater purpose.

Now you can see your reality in a cumulative way. You are planting something. It's a bit of a hassle. (INAUDIBLE) cultivating a garden. You are taking care of children; taking them to the school or asking them to do homework. All that could be stressful, actually, but you could think of it as raising your family. You could think of a job and day-to-day hassles or you could think of it as a career.

With cumulative works, what we say is that your actions and activities are now disconnected and that is why progressing toward goals -- for example, earlier Dave, you were saying in political activism or helping in environmental causes and in some causes that transcend us, whatever they are, they are going to be different for different people. Developing relations are ways to be happy because we are gradually filling the metaphorical bucket.

The thing is this is our choice, how we view our life and what we feel is that if you view things in a -- take a broader view of life. You know day-to-day annoyances are there for everybody but if you take a broader view of life, then you diminish the negative effects of these day-to-day annoyances.

**Dr. Dave:** Well, after the initial rush of enthusiasm, many of the findings and claims of positive psychology are coming under critical examination. I have to confess that I was really caught up in the enthusiasm of the movement.

**Sarin:** Uh-huh, Uh-huh.

**Dr. Dave:** For example, I wonder if you've seen the current issue of the *American Psychologists*®. There's an article in there where the authors present a contextual view, which is to say that the outcome of practices that are suppose to lead to a happy ending may turn out to be positive or negative depending upon their social context. They give the example of a woman in an abusive marriage. Optimism, forgiveness, gratitude and positive thinking or reframing may lead her to stay in an unhappy and dangerous situation. They cite a number of such examples and present research findings to back them up.

It's looking like the happiness question might be a lot more complex than we've been led to believe. What's your response to that?

**Sarin:** Right. You know I have not seen this article but in this particular example, again, there is a choice. We cannot be so -- for every bad situation where we can get out of it, right, we don't have to make a choice of seeing only the positive side as if that's the only choice we have.

So, yes, in this example, I would say maybe the other choice is to get out of this relationship even though there is some insecurity. What would I do if I get out of it? If somebody may be financially dependent or whatever -- we will not support that you take -- if you have an abusive situation or work where the environment is harassing you or creating a lot of stress in you, just see the positive and tolerate it. We feel you have a choice. You have a choice to get out. (chuckles) In fact, we will feel the other way that your overall life is improved by getting out of these bad situations and take the short term loss because yes, getting out sometimes is not easy but in the longer run you may come out ahead.

**Dr. Dave:** I guess it sort of sounds a warning against adopting a set of rules in a kind of almost like religious, no exception kind of way, you know.

**Sarin:** Right.

**Dr. Dave:** A doctrinaire kind of way, which we seem to have a tendency to want to do to simplify life and to just have a nice set of rules. So I must always think positive. I must always be full of gratitude. I must always find the positive aspect of the situation. No, we need more flexibility than that.

**Sarin:** Right, right. You are totally right. We need more flexibility and we always have to keep in mind we have a choice, you see? Sometimes it is good to make the other choice.

**Dr. Dave:** Yes.

**Sarin:** And that's difficult. Sometimes people get stuck in a job for so long and the job they did not like because every point in time, you say, if I give up, then what will I do next. Because unless you give it up, you do not know what else lies out there. Some people are lucky. They can find and line up something first, and then leave. But sometimes that's not possible. Or somebody who wants to do a business now, we do not know when he starts a business what will come out.

At some point, you have to gather the strength and say that's my passion and I have to go for that, right? Um-hmm.

**Dr. Dave:** Well, you're a professor at UCLA, which is not an easy place to get into and not an easy place to stay in. There are lots of pressures and so on. What do you do to keep your life in balance?

**Sarin:** Yes. I feel very lucky because in academic life, I love the academic life. I get to do my research. I enjoy teaching students and for my pleasure I play golf with my friends. That's a source of joy because it is not just the exercise part but also the getting together once a week with friends. Among all these friends, I have for more than 30 years. (chuckles) I enjoy that, yes, I feel, I am frankly lucky to be a UCLA professor.

**Dr. Dave:** Well, you know, I hear a warmth in your voice and humor that says to me that, in fact, you're doing a good job of applying your six laws and that you're keeping your life in balance.

As we wind down here, I wonder if there is anything you'd like to add.

**Sarin:** I usually tell my students that when one looks at life, we are all juggling many balls. Could be career, family; could be church activities, hobbies, political activism -- we are juggling many balls. Going to the classes or whatever. Once in a while a ball will drop and it bounces back. It's not a big deal but I always tell students that one of these balls has a basic good. What I earlier described as

basic good and that ball is the crystal ball and that crystal ball is your friends and family and one should not let that ball drop.

**Dr. Dave:** That's a wonderful close for us here. Dr. Rakesh Sarin, thanks for being my guest today on Shrink Rap Radio.

**Sarin:** Thank you very much, Dave. I really enjoyed our conversation.