

**Shrink Rap Radio #447, March 19, 2015, Finding Your Groove at Home and Work  
David Van Nuys, Ph.D., aka “Dr. Dave” interviews Christine Carter,  
Ph.D.**

(transcribed from [www.ShrinkRapRadio.com](http://www.ShrinkRapRadio.com) by Kat Bautista)

**Introduction:** On today’s show, I’ll be speaking with social psychologist and happiness expert, Dr. Christine Carter, who’s also the author of the 2015 book *The Sweet Spot: How to Find Your Groove at Work and Home*. Now, here’s today’s interview.

**Dr. Dave:** Dr. Christine Carter, welcome to Shrink Rap Radio.

**Christine Carter:** Oh, well, thank you so much for having me.

**Dr. Dave:** Well, I’m so pleased to have you on the show. I’ve been aware of you and your work for a long time. I’ve been a member of the Greater Good Science Center ever since I attended a workshop on positive psychology and health by Dacher Keltner...

**Carter:** Mm-hmm.

**Dr. Dave:** ...whom I also interviewed here. So I’ve seen your name for some time in periodic postings to members from the Greater Good Science Center. And do I recall correctly that you were executive director there up until fairly recently?

**Carter:** Yes, I was the executive director there for many, many years, although I haven’t been for a few years now. But we love our members. So thank you.

**Dr. Dave:** (laughs)

**Carter:** (laughs)

**Dr. Dave:** Yeah. Yeah. Well, I’m kind of jealous in a way because I was so impressed by Dacher that I was tempted to approach him for some kind of job there or even a volunteer position.

**Carter:** Yeah. Oh, it’s a wonderful organization and I’m glad that you’re participating by going to the workshops. And it’s really important for us. Our mission is to spread the word about all the science and translate it for the general public, so...

**Dr. Dave:** Yeah.

**Carter:** ...in a way you are a volunteer. (laughs)

**Dr. Dave:** It’s true, and I’ve interviewed a number of people who have been interviewed there or who’ve written books that are featured there and so on, so, recognized or not, I am a volunteer member. (laughs)

**Carter:** (laughs)

**Dr. Dave:** Thank you for that recognition. Now before we get into your current book, *The Sweet Spot*, I note that you wrote a previous book titled *Raising Happiness*, which I assume was strongly influenced by the positive psychology movement.

**Carter:** It was, although I really started working on that as a doctoral student in sociology.

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

**Carter:** So, that all began before positive psychology had gotten off the ground.

**Dr. Dave:** Yeah.

**Carter:** I just feel – it's just so wonderful how it's all developed in the last 10 years, but I am trained as a sociologist, not a psychologist, and that's been really fun for me, because the big difference is that my interest as a sociologist is more about how our culture and our social structures, like our families or the businesses that we interact with or work for, influence how we feel, and all social structures or cultures are going to tend to foster certain behaviors and emotions that go along with them and inhibit others. And we aren't often all that conscious of the forces outside of our brains...

**Dr. Dave:** That's right.

**Carter:** (laughs)

**Dr. Dave:** But while your remarks trigger several questions for me here – and one is how did you become attracted to positive psychology?

**Carter:** I mean, really, I was already studying the sociology of happiness and other positive emotions before the positive psychology movement, before I even knew about it, right? The positive psychology movement started as a pretty insular group of people who were very influential and good at what they did, but they didn't have a lot of interaction with sociology until they really became widespread 5 or 7 – yeah.

**Dr. Dave:** Yeah. Do you remember how you heard about it first?

**Carter:** How I heard about positive psychology first?

**Dr. Dave:** Yeah.

**Carter:** Well, Dacher Keltner was one of my dissertation advisors...

**Dr. Dave:** Oh, okay.

**Carter:** ...so I started to hear about the work that he was doing, and the interaction that we were having, and then as the executive director of the Greater Good Science Center, we often – I mean we started talking about, it was a real question for us how are we going to be different from what was happening at Penn.

**Dr. Dave:** Yeah.

**Carter:** And how could we support their work but then also distinguish ourselves and the answer was that we always said, “Okay, well, we do West Coast positive psychology”...

**Dr. Dave:** (laughs)

**Carter:** ...which is more sociological, actually in the sense that it’s more about how we can influence the community...

**Dr. Dave:** Ah.

**Carter:** ...and the culture. There’s more emphasis on compassion and empathy and interpersonal kinds of emotions and less on self-improvement.

**Dr. Dave:** Well...

**Carter:** Generally speaking. I mean, and it’s evolved, I think. We’ve become more similar...

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

**Carter:** ...over the years, but that was the original thinking.

**Dr. Dave:** Fascinating. And by the way, I was an undergraduate at Penn, but that was long before positive psychology was even a gleam in anybody’s eye. But still I like to claim the affiliation now. (laughs)

**Carter:** Well, it’s such a great affiliation, right?

**Dr. Dave:** Yeah.

**Carter:** It’s just such a wonderful movement that really was born there.

**Dr. Dave:** Yeah. Now you mentioned that you’re a sociologist by training and it makes me wonder, is there a parallel movement of what you might call positive sociology?

**Carter:** There is, it's – we don't call it positive sociology, though.

**Dr. Dave:** What do we call it?

**Carter:** We call it public sociology.

**Dr. Dave:** Huh.

**Carter:** And I don't know that they would say, "Oh yes, we're a parallel movement."  
But they are.

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

**Carter:** And I mean I often get called out as a – like when I get claimed as a public sociologist by this group and it's more about how we can do sociology that improves the public's lives. Right? So...

**Dr. Dave:** Yeah.

**Carter:** That brings something positive to the public. And it's not always immediately obvious why it's positive, right? Because sociology has – it's not necessarily the same as psychology in the sense that it's always been – psychology has been more focused on...

**Dr. Dave:** Pathology.

**Carter:** Pathology and dysfunction, right?

**Dr. Dave:** You're right. Yes.

**Carter:** In the same way, sociology has been focused on pathology and dysfunction at the societal level, right? So there is that parallel there, but there is a slight difference in that the public sociologists are not necessarily just studying positive emotions or positivity in society, though they are looking at what makes strong communities strong and what makes happy schools happy, for example.

**Dr. Dave:** Yeah.

**Carter:** They definitely care about that, but it's more – they're still studying what I think of as the isms, racism and sexism and all the things, but then looking at how we can make improvements. How we can grow.

**Dr. Dave:** Now you also used to work in marketing.

**Carter:** I did.

**Dr. Dave:** Yeah, what sorts of companies or products were you working with, if I may ask?

**Carter:** I worked – well I got my start in marketing in, well, actually in a family business, family-owned business that my great-grandfather started but then I went to work after college for the Quaker Oats company and I worked on a lot of different types of products in the cereals, organic cereals, but then also Cap'n Crunch. So, which is funny, because I've got 4 kids and I do not feed them Cap'n Crunch.

**Dr. Dave:** Well, you must have done a good job, because I eat a bowl of old-fashioned Quaker oatmeal every morning. (laughs)

**Carter:** Yeah. It's interesting because I am relatively good at marketing and so now I just say I'm now in the business of marketing ideas that will help the world, rather than products. (laughs)

**Dr. Dave:** Yeah. Well, the reason I wanted to ask you about marketing is I've had a parallel career as a market research consultant for many years and a few years ago I gave a presentation at a conference in Prague to the effect that it seemed to me that marketers in major corporations were grabbing hold of positive psychology. For example, Coca Cola's open happiness campaign. BMW had one...

**Carter:** Yeah.

**Dr. Dave:** ...called "We make joy." Sears has one called "Life. Well spent." Dove had the true colors campaign. Mastercard has "Things money can't buy." Starbucks, "What if we're not separate," and Allstate "Protect the basics" and finally, Kaiser Permanente "Arrive." What's your impression about that? Do you think I'm on the right track? Do you think marketers have been tapping into ideas from positive psychology?

**Carter:** Oh, gosh, yes, absolutely, I mean they're not even trying to hide the fact that they're tapping into these ideas. I get calls every week from major brands who want me to help them...

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

**Carter:** ...with this, and I – and so here's the thing. It's funny because, I mean, I've moved from brand management and consumer product marketing into what I'm doing now, because I didn't feel good about the type of marketing that I was doing. I knew when we were trying to market Cap'n Crunch to toddlers that...

**Dr. Dave:** Yeah.

**Carter:** ...there was something off. Right?

**Dr. Dave:** Yeah. Yeah.

**Carter:** It didn't have integrity to me.

**Dr. Dave:** Right.

**Carter:** I do do some work, a little tiny bit of work with some brands occasionally, because I've come around to the idea that this is something that is not going away, and our media and our advertising culture is so dominant – I just read this morning that the average person sees 500 ads a day. So those ads are having some influence on not just our culture but also our individual psyches.

**Dr. Dave:** Sure.

**Carter:** And so it's become important to me for these brands to get it right. Right?

**Dr. Dave:** Yes.

**Carter:** So I think that this media and advertising culture is for the most part leading people down the wrong path, right? They're saying...

**Dr. Dave:** I agree.

**Carter:** ...this will make you happier, and if you have the latest skinny jeans or longer eyelashes or this sort of car, it's almost deliberately confusing people in terms of what the road to happiness really is, right? And particularly it really lacks integrity, now that we know what brings happiness, and we have these companies that are advertising directly to our children...

**Dr. Dave:** Yeah, that's of particular concern and I know must be to you both as a marketer who's savvy to this stuff and as a mother.

**Carter:** Yeah, I know. I had this terrible experience the other day where I – we have rules – my kids like to watch sports on TV, they're all preteens and teenagers and I don't mind them watching sports, but I do mind them watching commercials, and so it's like this sort of this thing back and forth, whereas I want them to record it and fast forward through it but then they know what happens at the end of the game, when they – you know what I mean, like, it...

**Dr. Dave:** Yeah.

**Carter:** ...it's a tough thing, right? I understand why they don't really want to do that. And so I said, "Okay, well how about we compromise and you mute the commercials, so at least you're not listening to it and it'll encourage you to talk to each other or do something else while you wait."

**Dr. Dave:** Well, good for you.

**Carter:** And – well, no, listen. This is – (laughs) so they made a game out of it. They're like, "Yeah, that's fun." And with it on mute – then they decided that they actually only needed to see the first 5 seconds of the ad and they could then tell you exactly what the product was and why you should buy it.

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

**Carter:** Right? Right. They're like, "And the reason that State Farm is good is – and the reason that" – I mean, it was so – here's these kids who I have let watch – they've had so little exposure, I mean, as much as I could possibly control, they don't ever watch TV, except for the sports thing. And it was already there, they already had every single message.

**Dr. Dave:** Yeah.

**Carter:** So anyway, I don't – but I don't want to say it's all universally bad, because then I'd shut myself out from actually engaging in what isn't necessarily – I mean, I think, like, for example, Kaiser Permanente is spending millions of dollars on an advertising campaign which actually might help people be healthier. And happier. It might actually help people thrive. Right?

**Dr. Dave:** Yes. Yes.

**Carter:** So that's very different from Coca Cola's campaign, which is just a total sham. Right?

**Dr. Dave:** (laughs) Yeah.

**Carter:** (inaudible) drink happiness or whatever the heck they're saying. It drives me crazy because they are using the word happiness and the concept of happiness, and they're – I mean, and what happens to people's brain is they think it basically helps them conflate pleasure, the pleasure of getting a massive sugar hit...

**Dr. Dave:** Yeah.

**Carter:** ...while you drink chemical – sugar, whatever and that gratification that comes from that, the triggering of the reward system in your brain, and actual happiness. Our kids are in trouble enough as it is in terms of happiness. We do not need these messages that you can just buy or eat or drink something...

**Dr. Dave:** Yeah.

**Carter:** ...and have a happier life.

**Dr. Dave:** Yeah. My kids are grown now but I do have grandkids, and our culture just does not support parenting very much.

**Carter:** Mm-hmm.

**Dr. Dave:** So it's a real challenge. But hey, let's move on to your book, not that this is totally tangential, because it certainly...

**Carter:** No, not at all. Yeah.

**Dr. Dave:** ...it certainly does relate. The full title of your book is *The Sweet Spot: How to Find Your Groove at Home and Work*. How did you come to write this book?

**Carter:** Well, I will tell you the story. Maybe I can just read the first couple of paragraphs because...

**Dr. Dave:** Yeah.

**Carter:** ...that – do a little reading from the book that explains it and then we can get into the nitty-gritty.

**Dr. Dave:** Yeah, that would be great. And if there are any other points where you want to read or tell stories, please do, so that people really get a feeling both for your style of writing, and we all know how much story and personal anecdotes are good for hooking the brain. (laughs)

**Carter:** Yeah. Yeah. Absolutely. Okay, well, I might skip around a little bit then in this introduction, and just do a little reading. All right. “This book arose, like a phoenix, as an experiment in having it all. Could I fulfill my career potential and have a fulfilling family life? Could I be a great parent and still attend to my own needs? Could I be successful and happy without also feeling stressed and anxious? Having studied well-being and elite performance for the past decade, I’ve long known what to do to be both happy and successful; after all, I coach people from all over the world on these topics. But to be totally honest, in my day-to-day life, I used to struggle to walk the talk. Five years ago, I was a single mother holding down 3 demanding part-time jobs and my life was a blur. Yes, our family did find a way to eat dinner together most nights, and we talked about what we were grateful for. In some ways I practiced what I preached. But in other ways I was caught up in the busyness of modern life – winded, running on a hamster wheel, afraid to slow down. I’d lost my groove.”

**Dr. Dave:** Yeah.

**Carter:** So.



**Dr. Dave:** (laughs) Yeah, that really says it. How did you get so caught up at being in that treadmill in the first place?

**Carter:** Well, I had work I really loved as a parenting and life coach and then as the executive director and as a sociologist at UC Berkeley's Greater Good Science Center, as we were talking about. I was also a keynote speaker, and I was the author of *Raising Happiness*, and I was blogging all the time, and I had this great family life right? So I had made it through a really amicable but still extremely difficult divorce. It was just a big transition in my family life...

**Dr. Dave:** Yeah.

**Carter:** ...and so I was at this place where everything in my life was incredibly hard-won, Right? I was very happy with my family life, I was very happy with my career. And I didn't want to give any of it up. But I was so tired all the time. I mean, I just could not seem to get enough sleep, and for me – I caught every virus on every airplane. When you're really tired it's very hard to stay healthy. I mean, really, I was really sick all the time. When I say it wasn't just like I had a lot of colds, I had a strep throat infection that lasted for 18 months, 9 courses of antibiotics...

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

**Carter:** ...and still freakin' had strep throat, right? I really just had lost the ability to heal, and so it wasn't that I had anything life threatening, it was just low-grade illness all the time but then I hit rock bottom really in a day or two when I'd had surgery on my throat and then I'd, like, really struggled to recover from that, and I thought I was kind of recovered and then all of a sudden, boom, I had another major infection, and I ended up in the ER because my fever was so high and I was in so much pain. I had a kidney infection of all things, which – I mean, kidney infections are really painful, And I just had this moment where I was like, "Please admit me to the hospital. I'm supposed to get on a plane tomorrow to Atlanta to give another talk. I'm too tired. I just need to recover. Do you really have to just give me those antibiotics as a shot, can't I have IV antibiotics?"

**Dr. Dave:** (laughs)

**Carter:** Do you know what I mean?

**Dr. Dave:** Yeah. Yeah...

**Carter:** I was, like, begging the doctor to admit me into the hospital...

**Dr. Dave:** Yeah, you used the term in the book that I had never heard before called hospital fantasies.

**Carter:** Yeah. Yeah. I had heard about hospital fantasies before.

**Dr. Dave:** Actually wishing that you'd be sick enough to get a forced rest, a forced vacation in the hospital.

**Carter:** Yeah, here I'm going to read again from my book, because...

**Dr. Dave:** Good.

**Carter:** I think a lot of people don't know what a hospital fantasy is, so, "Not familiar with the concept of hospital fantasies? I was nearly as tired as this woman, who wrote on Katrina Alcorn's 'Working Moms Break' blog: 'I stumbled back to work while my son was 6 weeks old. He had colic and chronic ear infections so I really didn't sleep for a year. No exaggeration. I would fantasize about having a minor car accident on the way to work. Nothing serious – just enough to lay me up in the hospital for a few days so that I could sleep!'"

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

**Carter:** So, I mean, that's really it's how I felt, but I also knew – I mean, my experience of it was probably different from this woman who was writing on Katrina Alcorn's blog, because I had been studying productivity and elite performance and happiness for a decade, or at this point, over a decade. And here I am coaching people on it. Right?

**Dr. Dave:** Yeah.

**Carter:** I just knew I needed to get it together and that nobody's – most people give me advice just like everybody else, right? So, a lot – like...

**Dr. Dave:** (laughs)

**Carter:** Everybody else...

**Dr. Dave:** What? You get advice too? (laughs)

**Carter:** Go ahead.

**Dr. Dave:** I find that people are less good at listening and much better at giving advice.

**Carter:** (inaudible) Well, I'm guilty of that, definitely, but even, like, I'm a professional advice giver, basically...

**Dr. Dave:** Sure.

**Carter:** (inaudible) And the advice that other people would give me. This is my mom, of course, right? You could say that. Hopefully she won't listen to this, but she would always say, "Well, you're just going to have to give something up."

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

**Carter:** "You just have to accept you can't have it all. You think that you're better than everybody else," was what she was saying. And it wasn't that I thought I was better than everybody else, right? I thought I was different because I had more tools. I knew that I could do it without having to give up time with my children or the work that I had loved, right? I mean the having it all concept is very threatening to people who weren't able to have it all, like my mother, or for many groups in society. It's very threatening to see women lead fulfilling family lives and have fulfilling and profitable careers.

**Dr. Dave:** Yeah. And you're enjoying so much success or are enjoying so much success that I could see would be just so seductive to keep adding on more and more. Accepting every speaking engagement, etc.

**Carter:** Right. Yeah. And that's what I did. I was the executive director and that would have been enough. Right? That's enough of a job. (laughs)

**Dr. Dave:** Actually I felt guilty...

**Carter:** (inaudible)

**Dr. Dave:** ...I felt guilty reaching out to you for an interview. I thought, "Oh my goodness I'm putting another thing on her plate." (laughs)

**Carter:** Well, I'll tell you, I mean, I'm in a really different place now than I was then, of course, because I have a whole system. So at that point I knew I needed to figure it out, and figure out could I actually really have it all, or did I need to give stuff up? Did I have it wrong? And so The Sweet Spot is this recipe book for how I figured it out.

**Dr. Dave:** Yes.

**Carter:** It is really very much written as a guidebook because I figured it out for sure, and pretty darn fast, once I set my mind to it. I needed to go back and road test everything that I was advocating, everybody else too, and look at some of the newer research related to it, and very occasionally some of the research seemed to conflict, and so I needed – I mean, there were some things I needed to work out, but mostly I needed to change my habits and learn how to say no, so that...

**Dr. Dave:** Yeah.

**Carter:** ... – but here's the thing. People say, "Okay, so what did you do? You had to give up a lot." I did not give up anything that brought me joy. Nothing.

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

**Carter:** It was not simply a "Well, I slowed down and I had to give this, this, and this up." Yeah, it's true, I'm not the executive director of the Greater Good Science Center anymore, but guess what? That didn't bring me joy. I did it because I loved the organization and I was good at it. I was good at fundraising. I was good at writing strategic plans. But it wasn't – my heart wasn't in it for any other reason. I felt like I should do it because I had the ability to do it and because it was prestigious. But I wasn't doing it because it gave me a sense of like, "Oh, goody, I get to go into the office today and write a strategic plan." Right?

**Dr. Dave:** Yeah.

**Carter:** That's not what I wanted to be doing.

**Dr. Dave:** Yeah.

**Carter:** So yes, I did give things up, but nothing that brings ease or strength or joy into my life. And guess what? I mean, It was terrifying. I got to tell you it was – there's a whole chapter in this book on courage because that was part of what I needed to do, right? I needed to figure out how to be more courageous in my life. It took me forever to step down as the executive director and even longer to dial back some of my other involvement there to where I was just doing what I wanted to do. It was very scary. I never not had a steady income the way that that job provided me and moving to more of a – I have a very different relationship with the center now, and my – I had to move to different revenue models and do more of the coaching, which I love, and speaking, which do bring me much more joy, right? Well, guess what? My income is 5 times what it was.

**Dr. Dave:** Wow. (laughs)

**Carter:** And I...

**Dr. Dave:** There's a real endorsement for following your bliss.

**Carter:** Yeah, I mean, I don't think that we're always going to get paid for our hobbies. I definitely think we need to follow our bliss, but I think that the millennials tend to be a little bit confused about the difference between – I just think that it's not possible to always be able to make a living by doing what your hobby is. Right?

**Dr. Dave:** Yeah.

**Carter:** But I actually had already an incredibly proven career in all of these things. I knew how to make the money. By shifting where I was spending my time, the money did follow. I'm also a much more prolific writer, and I love that, right? So, by any measure, not just income, my career has really taken off. I'm also spending more time with my children, not less. And it's a higher quality time. I mean, I'm spending slightly less time driving them around and helping them with homework because that was an area where they wanted somebody else to be doing some of that stuff, and that has freed up more time for me to just not be multi-tasking when I'm with them.

**Dr. Dave:** Yeah, Yeah, that's great. One of the things that you emphasize for finding the sweet spot is to take a recess, which is an appropriate metaphor for someone who's worked with parents and children as much as you have. I remember as a kid in school, recess was the thing we looked forward to with great excitement all day.

**Carter:** Hmm.

**Dr. Dave:** What does taking a recess mean in this context?

**Carter:** It means shifting the type of brain activity, really, it's what it is, right? So our brains – most of us understand that when we go to sleep at night, for example, our brains shift between different sleep patterns, different types of brain waves, right? We have 5 stages of sleep and each is characterized by a different type of brain activity, and...

**Dr. Dave:** Sure.

**Carter:** ...and if we don't get some type of one of those stages (I actually don't know that much about it, I'm just using it as a metaphor), and...

**Dr. Dave:** Okay.

**Carter:** ...we end up being tired during the day or we don't process our emotions or whatever. Right? So what people don't realize is that our brains are not that different when we're awake. Right? We need different types of brain activity. And we think of our brains like computers. You switch it on, you should be able to focus, run multiple apps at any one given time, right? Like, but it's not true, right? Our brains have rhythms during the day and they need to fluctuate between periods of focus, periods of daydreaming, periods of play and that when we force ourselves to just keep focusing and then we experience a dip in our energy. We get tired, we have a cup of coffee instead and then we force ourselves to go back to work, stare at the screen. We basically induce a type of jet lag in ourselves, right? We understand that if we don't get the right kind of sleep or we travel to a different time zone, our brain has a hard time functioning well.

**Dr. Dave:** What sorts of recesses did you create in your life?

**Carter:** Well, so the first thing was just that concept of taking a break while I was working. I set an alarm. I work for about 45 or 50 minutes now, sometimes up to an hour if I'm really in the flow, and then I take about a 10 or 20-minute break. I will walk outside, because sunlight really helps and I live in California, and throw the ball for my jog. Or I will read an article of interest because curiosity is a way to – you just can't be on a task list, right? It has to count – It's sort of like adult play. If I read something that I have been really curious about, that can rejuvenate me. It's really important to just give ourselves time to stare into space and let our minds wander. So...

**Dr. Dave:** You know, I'm supposedly retired...

**Carter:** What? (laughs)

**Dr. Dave:** ...and I have trouble doing what you're talking about. (laughs)

**Carter:** Yeah, so you have time. You have time to do it but our culture – okay, so I think one of the biggest, most pernicious myths in our culture is that busyness is a sign of importance.

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

**Carter:** And so when we – even if we intellectually know it's really – our brains are really going to benefit from staring into space, and I can talk a little bit more about why our brains benefit from that. But if we're going – we might intellectually know that, but we feel as though if busyness is a sign of significance and importance and productivity and success, then staring into space or letting my mind wander – not only is it wasting time and time is money and we hate that feeling, right? That causes anxiety. But also not being busy makes us feel the opposite of – we feel unimportant and unproductive and insignificant. Right? And all of that creates a lot of anxiety for us. If we intellectually know that these things aren't true, we all know really significant people doing very important work in the world who are not busy. They do not multitask, they aren't overwhelmed, they have plenty of time to just stare into space. Right? I was just speaking at the Wisdom 2.0 conference this last weekend and they're all there. Right? Those people.

**Dr. Dave:** (laughs)

**Carter:** They're all there. It's like...

**Dr. Dave:** Right.

**Carter:** ...really inspiring to hear these really great neuroscientists and political leaders and spiritual leaders talking about the way they spend their time. And believe me, they're not busy. And you know by the same token we all know plenty of people

who are busy and overwhelmed and multitasking who aren't particularly productive. It's paralyzing to be busy. And...

**Dr. Dave:** So I think that – I'm just thinking about myself and generalizing from there. And I'm thinking about maybe a lot of it – the busyness is driven by anxiety, by anxiety of...

**Carter:** Yeah.

**Dr. Dave:** ...not being successful, not being enough blah blah blah.

**Carter:** Yep. Yeah. And I mean, I think, yes, so these anxious feelings come up, maybe even feelings of guilt, right? That you feel lazy or whatever, and then I think that we have to pair that if you look at what's happened in our society – so I'm sitting here at my desk, I know I should just take a little break and stare out the window, but then the anxiety rises up that I need to keep being productive, I need to keep doing stuff and all I have to do is turn my head back to my computer and check my email, or maybe I'm just standing in line at the grocery store and I start to feel guilty for not being productive at that very moment, so I can just pull my computer out of my pocket, basically...

**Dr. Dave:** Yes, right, we have a computer on us all the time now.

**Carter:** Yeah, and so we can make ourselves busy and productive at any time. And so it's that, right? So thinking about the ability to just daydream and let your brain rest, I still also – I want to come back – we have to talk about what actually happens in your brain when you're doing that, because important things happen. That's a skill, the ability to just be a passenger on a commuter train and look out the window.

**Dr. Dave:** Yeah. Instead of having your laptop out and working on there...

**Carter:** Right. Right.

**Dr. Dave:** ...the report that you have to write. You've used a beautiful phrase in the book, "full plate, empty life."

**Carter:** Yeah.

**Dr. Dave:** That's pretty strong language.

**Carter:** Yeah, it is, but that's where we end up, right? We are busy and overwhelmed, but our lives feel empty because here's what happens. So we feel the anxiety come up, we check our phones. Let's just say that that's our – we're at a red light while driving and we feel like, "It's a good time to be productive," and so then we quickly check our messages, right?

**Dr. Dave:** Yeah.

**Carter:** So that, and that's actually a really effective way to numb those feelings of anxiety that come up. Right?

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

**Carter:** So you feel anxious, you get back to being busy and "productive" (it's not real productivity) but you feel that way and the emotion goes away. Now, here's the thing about the human experience, the brain, we cannot selectively numb certain emotions. If I'm numbing out that anxiety or that guilt or the uncomfortable thought that arose at the red light, I am also effectively numbing out all the emotions. So the profound joy that might have come when on the next block I picked my children up from school, or the great gratitude that comes and produces a nice warm feeling in our chest when we see something heartwarming out the window as we're sitting at the light. Right? We numb all of our emotions, so as Louis C.K. says, "We never really feel happy, we never really feel sad, we just feel kinda satisfied with our product, and then we die." Right?

**Dr. Dave:** Hmm.

**Carter:** That is the – and what's happening is that we don't – we no longer really enjoy the lives that we have worked so hard to create.

**Dr. Dave:** Right. Now you've got a chapter called The Stress/Success Tipping Point, and we're all familiar with the tipping point concept from Malcolm Gladwell's book, but tell us what you're getting at there.

**Carter:** Well, there's also a psychological tipping point at the individual level where when you have 3 positive emotions, about 3 positive emotions to every 1 negative emotion or even experience or interaction, so in terms of 3 positive experiences to 1 negative. And these things could be just a fleeting feeling of gratitude, for example, or anger, or whatever. When that ratio gets above 3 to 1 for most people, something dramatic happens in our brain and our functioning. So there is a real shift in terms of, like, the areas of your brain that are getting oxygenated or getting the right or optimal amount of blood sugar. It changes your perception of the world literally in terms of – it broadens your perspective so your peripheral vision actually becomes more crisp, but then it also figuratively broadens your perception in terms of the way that we take in information. You're able to see context better, more able to see the forest for the trees. So lots of things start to happen where you're more able to think creatively to come up with an innovative solution to a problem, particularly a problem that requires some form of insight. We become more verbally fluent, more able to empathize with other people, to see other people's needs and then meet them. So, I mean, lots of really wonderful things happen, and so...

**Dr. Dave:** So what triggers that? Is it focusing on...



**Carter:** Positive emotions. So having 3 positive emotions to every 1 negative. So the interesting thing about that is that it's not just about positive thinking and having lots of positive thoughts. It's really about the ratio. Right? Life is really difficult, and those difficult emotions that come with some of life's challenges or maybe even traumas are also really important. They're important for – I mean, we think of them as like the bottom half of a sailboat. Right? The keel of a ship. It helps keep us balanced and steered in the right direction. It's not – but the positive emotions, the sails, basically, that's what puts wind in our sails that creates motion and growth.

**Dr. Dave:** So how do you make sure you're getting those positive emotions more than a 3 to 1 ratio?

**Carter:** Well, we actively foster them. Right? So you might be going through a difficult time, or you're experiencing a lot of challenging or uncomfortable emotions, so we make sure that you are also doing what it takes to bring in positive emotions. So if you'll indulge me, I will broaden – most people just think about happiness, right? And as we already spoke about earlier in the interview, we tend to conflate happiness with pleasure and gratification. And that's actually not what we're talking about at all. So happiness or a sense of cheerfulness or joy, which is a more profound positive emotion, takes place in the present and it can go with contentment or engagement or passion, but we also need to think about positive emotions about the past, like gratitude or appreciation, which I've mentioned, or the future, like optimism, faith, hope. Confidence can be a very positive emotion about the future. And then, of course, our most powerful positive emotions are actually about other people, so love and compassion, and positive emotions that are more global in nature, I actually find them to be really easy to access like awe, inspiration and elevation. Right?

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

**Carter:** So let's look at those last three, the global positive emotions. I love them, because we study them at the Greater Good Science Center and...

**Dr. Dave:** (laughs)

**Carter:** (laughs)

**Dr. Dave:** Okay.

**Carter:** And I find them easy to access – so I feel a real sense of awe, for example, out in nature, and I happen to live in an area in northern California where there's a beautiful hike and there's a beautiful vista, and I can just – and there's this area where there are all these ferns and these redwood trees and I can – I feel a sense of awe every time I do it. And I cultivate that. So how do I feel awe? I go on this hike because I know for me that's what works.

**Dr. Dave:** Hmm.

**Carter:** If I don't have time to go for a hike, I have bookmarked on my computer, my youtube channel and actually my entire website every Friday, I post videos that I feel – that make me cry, basically, they inspire me, they create this sense of elevation that is – that usually it's watching people do inspiring things and...

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

**Carter:** ...and actually it cultivates this emotional state of elevation and inspiration and that's how we do it, right? So people are like, "Really? You're just going to, like, advocate that we sit and watch Youtube videos?"

**Dr. Dave:** (laughs)

**Carter:** Right? Funny animal videos, if that makes you laugh, that's a positive emotion.

**Dr. Dave:** Yeah, puppies.

**Carter:** Right? Those baby laughing...

**Dr. Dave:** Laughing babies and puppies, I love them.

**Carter:** Like, yeah, laughing babies, right? What people should know is that researchers used Youtube videos all the time to cultivate positive emotions before they study them. I mean, they literally can show a measurable change in people's functioning after they've watched a puppy play in a little field for a couple of minutes, or watched a video of a whale that is so – it's awesome, right? To give them scale. So there's really something to it, and it's not – this is fun. I'm adding things to your task list that are fun to do and will improve your functioning so that life feels easier. Right?

**Dr. Dave:** Right.

**Carter:** And that's the whole goal. The title of my book is The Sweet Spot, and I got that – the sweet spot to me is the overlap between where we have our greatest ease in our life and where we have our greatest strengths. Right? So many of us are used to the assumption – we assume that we will only get where we want to go in life, this was certainly my assumption, by making a really powerful effort, right?

**Dr. Dave:** Yes. Yes.

**Carter:** I was so focused on the constant effort and my high pain tolerance, but the sweet spot's really about finding our place of effortless power. Right?

**Dr. Dave:** Yeah.

**Carter:** It's not always about making a more powerful effort. That doesn't mean that I don't try very hard at anything anymore. Of course I do. But I'm all that effort that I'm making is – the end game for me now always is in developing effortless power where I don't feel resistance, I don't feel stress, I just feel the ease and my own strength.

**Dr. Dave:** Well, I love that word, “ease,” and related to that I think you talk about developing the ability to be more reliant on your autopilot.

**Carter:** Yes.

**Dr. Dave:** So what is this autopilot? I think I know but I'd love to hear you talk about it.

**Carter:** (inaudible) Yes, it's the ultimate form of ease. Our brain has this incredible capacity to run on autopilot. Our habits, basically, are our autopilot. And so much of our brain activity and our behaviors during the day are run by this part of our brain that is responsible for our habits, and neuroscience has developed enough in the last 5 to 7 years that we understand how that part of our brain responsible for our habits or autopilot is programmed, right? We can write the code for our habits, and this is a really important thing actually for us to learn how to do, I think, because so many of us waste so much of our time and energy, really, it's more a waste of our energy, just making decisions and trying to get it through things that can be just routine. Right? So I watch this all the time with people's morning routines, they wake up and they check their email before they even get out of bed, right? And then they're already racing, like, “Okay, should I respond to that email? Or should I take a shower? Should I make my coffee, or should I skip my exercise?” And I got to tell you, my morning routine, it might be boring, but it is predictable. I always meditate, I always do my exercise and I do it all in the same order and I do it with no effort whatsoever anymore because I've just programmed that part of my brain.

**Dr. Dave:** Hmm.

**Carter:** Why exert a big effort getting yourself to exercise if you could just program yourself to do it?

**Dr. Dave:** Yeah. Yeah. I have my own autopilot story, as I mentioned earlier. I used to be involved in market research conducting focus groups for corporations, and in the early days I would panic at some point near the end of the group or right after it, realizing that I've been so immersed in the process, in the here and now of the group that I couldn't remember the specifics of what had been said. And so I'd be flashing ahead to the fact that I would have to write a detailed report, but with

experience, I learned to relax and just turn it over to my unconscious and to sleep on it...

**Carter:** Mm-hmm.

**Dr. Dave:** ...and to trust that the next day, the key meanings of the research would become clear.

**Carter:** Yes.

**Dr. Dave:** And that's been a major learning in my life, to just turn it over to the sleeping brain and not worry about it and then the next day there's so much more clarity.

**Carter:** Yeah, absolutely. So you bring up a really good point there, and that is that we assume that nothing happens for us unless we put that effort towards it, right? That it's like...

**Dr. Dave:** Yes.

**Carter:** ...this idea of the sleeping brain. One of the reasons that it's so important to give ourselves those recesses that we were talking about and really give – really honestly give ourselves time to daydream and just stare into space while we're waiting in line or whatever we're doing. Or just taking a break. A part of our brain comes online when we're daydreaming that cannot be active when we're focused on something and that part of our brain is responsible for our creative insights. So our insights are a great source of this sweet spot ease and strength. Right?

**Dr. Dave:** Yes.

**Carter:** We have to trust that most of our brain activity is actually unconscious, and your brain is hard at work all the time. If we're just staring into space it doesn't mean that our brain is just like – we're flatlining or something, right? You know what I mean?

**Dr. Dave:** (laughs)

**Carter:** I'm mixing metaphors there...

**Dr. Dave:** Yeah.

**Carter:** ...but still, it doesn't mean that nothing is happening. Something different is happening. And so, I mean, it's almost a cliché, but I feel like we need to remind people, so think about the last super innovative solution you came up to to solve a problem. Where did you come up with it? Ask anybody about this and 99 percent of the time they will say they came up with that idea in the shower. Right?

**Dr. Dave:** I was just about to say that. For me it's definitely the shower.

**Carter:** Okay, well, think about that. What does the shower have that the rest of our lives doesn't have anymore? Most people don't bring their phones, their smartphones, into the shower.

**Dr. Dave:** I've thought about it. (laughs)

**Carter:** (laughs) I know, right? And most people don't have radios in their shower. It's the only time during the day that we reliably have to just stare into space...

**Dr. Dave:** Yeah.

**Carter:** ...daydream, and when we do that, our brain starts forming neural connections between things that we didn't previously see as connected, then those connections between things that aren't necessarily connected are what really are responsible for our innovations and our (cut-off audio)

**Dr. Dave:** Yeah. I occasionally – I would get a request for “market research” for pricing and for strategy and so on about how to approach the research, and my first impulse is to respond right away, to show how responsive I am, how available I am, etc. But often I then regret after I've (laughs) later thought after I've fired off the email, other ideas begin to occur...

**Carter:** Hmm.

**Dr. Dave:** ...about strategy, about pricing and so on. And so I really have to restrain myself, and I'm still in the process of learning that, that that it's better to – instead of trying to demonstrate how available and accessible I am...

**Carter:** Mm-hmm.

**Dr. Dave:** ...to create a little bit more space.

**Carter:** Right, right. And, I mean, just having that self-awareness, the solution arises right? So when you realize this, that it's important to you to be available and responsive, and it's also important to you to have time for thought. You can then respond right away that says, “I'll look forward to working on this. I'll be in touch soon.” Right?

**Dr. Dave:** Yes.

**Carter:** And then give yourself the time that you need to just percolate. But then where most of us fall short is that we don't really give ourselves the time that we need in the sense that we don't give ourselves the unfocused time, right?

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

**Carter:** So I try and take at least one really long walk everyday and it is always hardest when I am in the most productive, or really it's funny, the busiest – to just let myself just walk. Just walk. And not listen to a book on tape, listen to a podcast, call my mom back, call – make a bunch of calls, whatever. Just walk. But I learned to do that because I need the power and the ease that comes from the insights that are generated.

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

**Carter:** And I've learned to trust it, right? What people should know is that it's not like I go for a long walk and then come back with the solutions to all my problems, or all the things that I'm working on. Sometimes, I end up thinking, chewing on something, and I come back with all these fabulous ideas and I make sure that I write them down, right? But more often than that I just have to trust that something is happening in there.

**Dr. Dave:** Yeah.

**Carter:** And it's a good idea, I mean actually we do know a lot about creativity and insight. It's a really good idea before you give yourself that daydreaming time to present your brain with all the problems that you would like it to work out while you're not giving it any effort, right?

**Dr. Dave:** Yes.

**Carter:** To say, "Oh," – I mean, so for me the way that that looks is that I'll say, "All right, I really want to write a blog post about stress in college students and I wonder what would be important for me to – what research would be important for me to look up, and I wonder what I should say." Right? That's enough. You don't have to give it any more effort than that.

**Dr. Dave:** Hmm.

**Carter:** And then I don't consciously try it, it's also really important not to try and engage your conscious mind in it, because that's then just focus. Right? That's just the part of your brain that we already know how to access. And you need to let it happen unconsciously, and so just let your mind wander. If you feeling anxious, let yourself feel how you feel. Right?

**Dr. Dave:** Yes.

**Carter:** Notice the anxiety and the guilt that comes up with some curiosity and definitely a healthy dose of acceptance. It's normal. It's normal in our culture.

You've been taught your whole life that if you're not being productive, focusing on something, actively do do doing something that you're unimportant and insignificant. Of course you feel anxious. It's normal. But just let yourself feel it. And for me I am able to bring humor to that. I mean, I probably still feel anxious sometimes when I'm not productive, particularly if I haven't had a lot of downtime and it's like a big gear switch that I can – it's funny that I, of all people, I'm like a daydreaming evangelist and I still... (laughs)

**Dr. Dave:** (laughs)

**Carter:** You know what I mean? So I can laugh at myself and say, “Wow there is that familiar feeling of anxiety. Boy, the culture has got me.”

**Dr. Dave:** Yeah.

**Carter:** I am programmed.

**Dr. Dave:** Yes, as are we all.

**Carter:** Yeah.

**Dr. Dave:** Right.

**Carter:** Yeah, I know. Sadly, but it's...

**Dr. Dave:** Yeah.

**Carter:** ...the reality, and so we get to choose our response.

**Dr. Dave:** The word that leapt out at me and what you were saying was trust. And the learning to trust our unconscious, learning to trust that automatic pilot.

**Carter:** Hmm.

**Dr. Dave:** It's like a miracle that the brain is there providing these great connections as long as we've done some due diligence ahead of time. In terms of...

**Carter:** Yeah.

**Dr. Dave:** ...spade work in preparation, but not worrying about it.

**Carter:** No. No, the worry actually will hinder...

**Dr. Dave:** Yes.

**Carter:** ...the creative insight. If you're worried or anxious, the insights won't come because your brain knows that it doesn't have the luxury. It has this old fight or flight system built into it and that if you're under any source of stress or threat or whatever which just the thought that I'm insignificant, that's enough of a threat, right? Or I'm unproductive or unsuccessful, that's a threat and so the brain will put all its resources towards survival, which – those survival resources are not very good – you can't come up with a creative insight, right? That part of your brain gets shunted if you're in survival mode, you're going to be really good at fighting or running away from the situation. But in order to be good at that, your brain has to shut down anything that is future-oriented, planning-oriented, that takes – what we think of as executive function. Or creativity. Because if you're under threat you don't want to be slowed down by a pesky decision-making process or by brainstorming about new creative ideas for blog posts or whatever, right? You need to get the heck out of there or you need to fight off this threat. And that is where you energy will go. And your – so...

**Dr. Dave:** Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. Well, given that you're a sociologist, we shouldn't be too surprised that you have a whole section on cultivating relationships and there's been a lot of evidence in the positive psychology literature linking strong social ties to longevity and happiness, right?

**Carter:** Yes.

**Dr. Dave:** So how do relationships tie into our ability to cope with “the overwhelm”?

**Carter:** Yeah, well, you've just said it. The best predictor of a person's happiness and by some measures health and longevity as well is the breadth and the depth of our ties to other people, our social ties. And so going back to what we were talking about the stress/success tipping point, the easiest way to get our positive emotions up over 3 – that ratio, over 3 to 1 or at 3 to 1, is by cultivating love and compassion for other people. They're just our most powerful emotions. They create the biggest effect physiologically in us. And I mean it ties directly back to what we were just talking about. So if you need to signal to your brain that you're not in survival mode, that you're in a mode where you can be your most creative, intelligent, productive self, the way to do that is to care about other people. Because that shifts you from individual survival mode to species survival. Right?

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

**Carter:** So if you signal to your brain like, “I have enough resources right now, not just to take care of myself but to take care of others and to be concerned about others and to feel compassion.” Compassion's a very powerful positive emotion, which is surprising to people. Then your brain shifts into this wonderful place of great expansiveness.



**Dr. Dave:** That's an excellent place for us to wind down. I wonder if there's anything you'd like to add by way of summary.

**Carter:** Well, I will summarize and say that all of this does tie back to where in our lives we have the greatest ease and the greatest strength, right? In our relationships with other people bring us both great ease by signaling to our nervous system that we are safe and loved, and also great strength. Right? Our greatest power comes from other people – the people who support us, the people who mentor us, the people who inspire us.

**Dr. Dave:** All right. Well Dr. Christine Carter, I want to thank you for being my guest on Shrink Rap Radio.

**Carter:** Oh, it's been delightful. Thank you for having me.