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The Relentless Pursuit of Happiness: How Positive Thinking Can Become Toxic and What to Do Instead Brand + Design Scoop ep. 016 Podcast Transcript

Welcome to Brand + Design Scoop, where I share practical, relatable tips on branding, design, and building a business for do-it-yourselfers who want to stop doing everything themselves.

I'm Kelly, a brand strategist and Squarespace website designer and founder of AKS Design Studio.

Today I'm going to be a not just a bit life coach-y and discuss the pursuit of happiness, positive thinking, and how too much positive thinking can turn into toxic positivity. I'll also be interviewing my friend Denise Dee about how she helps her clients experience a full range of emotions through her writing course called Tell Your Story. I'm going to be mentioning a bunch of articles and a few studies. I'll tell you now that there are links to all of them in the show notes. So, I won't repeat that every time I cite a source.

The “pursuit of happiness” is written into the Declaration of Independence as an inalienable right. The Founders of the United States of America believed that we have a God-given right to pursue happiness—equal to the rights to life and liberty. But has this pursuit of happiness gotten away from us? Has it become an obsession?

The exhortation to be happy and to look on the bright side seems to be everywhere—from advertisers to social-media influencers to our loved ones. It's now even coming from our candies. The M&M mascots (the girly ones, at least) were redesigned to reflect a more “dynamic, progressive world.” In an opinion piece in the *Washington Post* called “[Dear Sweethearts: Don't tell me I GOT THIS](#),” Christine Emba discusses how society is currently focused on what we'll call a “relentless pursuit of happiness,” which has turned into toxic positivity.

We've really felt this during the pandemic, especially back during lockdown, haven't we? I mean, we heard so many stories about so many people who were so productive during lockdown. Remember sourdough starters? Banana bread? People learning languages? Writing books? Becoming TikTok famous? How shitty did you feel for barely making Zoom meetings or supervising online school for your kids?

Emba writes how we are being told that “growth is a must and that our success depends on us alone. Positive thinking will see us through.” She writes that “Telling the burned-out teacher to ‘FEAR LESS’ doesn’t make her hybrid Zoom/masked classroom less chaotic. It’s not helpful to say ‘CHIN UP’ as the rising tide lifts the 417-foot yacht and drowns the poor. In the end, individual exhortations won’t fix what are really societal problems. ‘U GOT THIS’ is not a scalable solution.” She further writes that “that wintergreen-flavored ‘WAY TO GO’ is a distasteful manifestation of toxic positivity — emblematic of the misguided idea that we can and should solve major problems through the sheer force of individual will.”

Positive thinking as a solution for personal and global problems really does seem to be everywhere. When we experience a failure or some other difficulty, friends and loved ones may tell us, “It could be worse” or “you’ll get ‘em next time.” When we worry about climate change, someone may tell us, “Don’t worry; scientists are working on it!” As if looking for a silver lining is going to make us feel better about failure or loss or the severity of climate change. That silver-lining thinking makes us suppress how we really feel. It creates a disconnect between us and that other person. It makes us feel alone. And it causes stress in our bodies. As we go through this podcast, I’ll be hitting on all of these points.

I’ve been reading a book by psychotherapist Whitney Goodman called Toxic Positivity: Keeping It Real in a World Obsessed with Being Happy. She came upon the topic of toxic positivity when she went on Instagram in 2018 to market her private practice. The algorithm started bombarding her with posts about motivational thinking, positive thinking, and affirmations. The posts made her feel shitty about herself, and she thought that the posts would make her clients feel terrible, too. So, she started collecting the posts for research into what was going on.

Goodman defines toxic positivity as the pressure to pursue happiness at all costs, no matter what the circumstances are — whether this pressure comes from ourselves or from other people. In a YouTube video for the Same Time Next Week? Podcast she discusses how she hears from so many clients, “I know I shouldn’t complain, but.... I know I should be grateful,

but....” This is toxic positivity in action, when you feel that internalized pressure to minimize or ignore your real feelings.

Goodman notes that toxic positivity is dismissive. It’s essentially telling yourself or someone else that they’re wrong to have certain feelings or that they shouldn’t be having those feelings. In contrast, she defines healthy positivity as making the space for someone to feel what they’re going to feel and arrive at optimism in their own time without being dragged there.

When someone is venting difficult emotions to me, something that I do is I ask the person, “Do you want to vent, or do you want advice.” Goodman totally backs this up. She says that, most of the time, we know how to solve a problem. So, jumping in and offering a solution isn’t helpful—unless the person actually asks for advice.

So, instead of offering advice or a silver-lining perspective, Goodman suggests using affirming statements or asking questions. For affirming statements, she gives examples such as, “That makes sense” or “that sounds really hard.” For questions, she suggests, “What was the hardest part?” or “what do you wish was different?”

In life coaching, we call this active listening and powerful questions. You can even do this on yourself. I’m sure you’ve seen those memes that go something along the lines of, “Speak to yourself like you were speaking to your best friend.” You know, something like that. Those memes imply that we don’t speak kindly enough to ourselves. And that’s so often really true. We berate ourselves and blame ourselves. I’ve got an example of that coming up from a Facebook friend who blamed herself for getting breast cancer.

Showing empathy to ourselves and to others removes that pressure to feel better and—ironically or coincidentally, however you want to look at it—ends up making us feel better. That empathy helps to calm us down. It makes us feel more connected. And it shows us that we’re not alone.

I watched a movie at the Tribeca Film Festival last year called *Mission: Joy*, directed by Louis Psihoyos. He also directed the documentaries “The Cove” and “Racing Extinction.” In *Mission: Joy*, we explore the friendship between the Dalai Lama and Archbishop Desmond Tutu. It is a beautiful film, and I greatly admire both men. I was terribly sad when Desmond Tutu died last year.

There was a scene that particularly stuck with me and made me upset at the Dalai Lama. The men visited a boarding school in India where Tibetan children were sent—from Tibet—by their families, to be safe and to maintain the Tibetan culture.

During this scene, some children were taking turns talking to the men, who were sitting on a dais. The children were thanking the men for being there and sharing their experiences of being at the school. But one teenage girl was crying and shared how sad she was about being away from her parents who were back in Tibet.

The Dalai Lama spoke first. He told the girl that she shouldn't be sad. She is at a wonderful school with wonderful teachers, learning wonderful things. She should be grateful for everything she has.

The girl was not consoled. In fact, she cried more.

Then Archbishop Tutu spoke to her. He acknowledged how difficult it must be for her to be away from her parents, in a different country, trying to make new friends. He acknowledged that she must feel scared and lonely sometimes. The girl started to calm down. She visibly softened. She stopped crying.

Archbishop Tutu showed her empathy. He practiced active listening. He validated her feelings. The girl felt seen and heard. She wasn't looking for her problem to be solved. She wanted someone to understand. To get that understanding from this holy man seemed to give her immeasurable relief.

In contrast, the Dalai Lama's "look on the bright side and be grateful" positivity made her feel worse. He rejected her feelings and essentially told her to suck it up—though more kindly than that.

Again, I respect the Dalai Lama. But I find his positivity to be disconnected from the human experience. Maybe this is enlightenment. I don't know since I'm not enlightened! But advising people to look on the bright side of a negative situation can make them feel worse—as it did for this girl. It's not showing compassion, as he has taught about for decades, and as Buddhism teaches.

When we don't allow ourselves the full range of human emotions, we aren't showing compassion to ourselves. We are bypassing what it means to be human.

Jodi Ettenberg writes in "[A spinal fluid leak derailed my life of travel and food, but taught me to find beauty in the small things](#)" about how a cerebrospinal fluid leak left her incapacitated and upended her life of travel blogging. She discusses how she plummeted into despair and grief. But, when she shared her feelings with friends and with followers on Instagram, what she got back was advice to "think positively" and "be grateful."

Here is a brief excerpt: "Well-meaning people sent me Instagram posts about how positive thinking would help my healing. I read books about happiness, and about how daily affirmations could make me feel better. Yet every word I consumed made me feel more alone. Toxic positivity promises that gratitude is all you need. Losing my mobility taught me otherwise. Feeling general appreciation or gratitude does not fix everything when life unspools. Worse, when illness is involved, the insistence on gratitude can be alienating, and even cause harm. Patients feel castigated for not being 'grateful enough'."

The author found that what she had to do was first to process her anger and her grief. She had to feel everything. Then she was able to see every moment as a choice, as she writes later in the article.

In an article on CNN dot com called "[When does a good attitude become toxic positivity?](#)", Jamie Long, a clinical psychologist in Florida, says that hiding our emotions from other people is creating a gap between who we really are and the persona that we create for the world—the mask we wear to hide our true selves. She notes that in that gap is shame, that what we feel in hiding our emotions from other people is shame.

What we worry about is that they will judge us for how we really feel. Whether they tell us to "look on the bright side" or they just don't understand how we feel, we run the risk of feeling ashamed for having those feelings.

That's really understandable. When we get those reactions from people, they are essentially telling us that they can't imagine feeling what we're feeling, that they haven't been in our position before, or that they've never had these feelings before. We feel alone and alienated—as if we're the only one in the world who has ever felt this way. And that feels shameful. We think that there must be something wrong with us to feel this way.

But that's so not true.

Doesn't it feel like such a relief when we share and someone really gets us? We feel validated and connected to that person. Even if they haven't had the exact same experience, they get it. They *can* imagine how we feel. They're telling us that it's okay to feel this way. There's no shame. We discover that we're not alone.

There are things we don't share with other people—even close friends and family members—because we are worried about how they will respond. This is a form of suppressing our emotions. It's not that we have to go around sharing our feelings with everyone. But we should be able to share how we're really feeling with those closest to us. Even if we're allowing ourselves to feel our feelings on our own, it's really helpful to have someone or a few people with whom to share our feelings.

And it doesn't always have to be someone closest to us. Some of the most connected moments I've had have been with people I barely know or just met. When I've opened up to them in some random, gut-instinct moment of trust, I've felt this incredible validation that I truly am not alone, that what I'm feeling really is universal.

We feel really validated and less alone when we share with someone who shows empathy and understanding, someone who doesn't try to get us to find a silver lining. Worrying that they *will* try to “silver lining” us makes us feel alone and unwilling to share—even unwilling to be our true selves around them. This is so heartbreaking.

I've totally been there. When my ex-husband and I split nearly five years ago, I was devastated. I fell into grief and despair. I had some friends who were really empathetic and encouraged me to process my feelings. But several other friends said things like, “Good riddance” or “you'll do better next time.” Maybe and maybe. But that's not what I was ready to hear in that moment—and not for quite some time. I needed to feel that grief and devastation. We had been together for 17 years. We had plans, and I had seen a future of growing old with him. I didn't think that divorce was in the cards.

So, I got to the point quickly where I'd just say, “Oh, it's fine. I'm fine with it.” But that wasn't true for a long time. It's not that I wanted to discuss the details or my feelings with everyone. But I

didn't allow them or myself the opening to do so. I didn't allow for the possibility of a real connection with other people.

Fortunately, I had those few friends with whom I *did* have that real connection and who really supported me during that time. That was a huge help and made me feel less alone. Having those connections also made me feel less stressed. At first, I had lost my appetite. It was hard to sleep. And my heart felt like it was always racing.

At least one study has demonstrated that suppressing difficult feelings has an adverse effect on our bodies. The study is called "Effects of suppression and acceptance on emotional responses of individuals with anxiety and mood disorders." The investigators looked at the subjective and physiological effects of suppressing versus accepting emotions. Sixty participants were randomly assigned to one of two groups. One group was given a rationale for suppressing emotions. And the other group was given a rationale for accepting emotions. The participants then watched a film intended to provoke emotions. After watching the film, both groups reported similar levels of distress *during* the film. But the acceptance group showed less negative affect in the post-film recovery period. Physiologically, the suppression group showed an increase in heart rate, while the acceptance group showed a decrease in heart rate in response to the film.

This study shows that suppressing emotions is physiologically bad for us. Jumping straight to positive thinking instead of feeling the full range of emotions hurts our bodies. It's not that having a higher heart is doing immediate damage. But it's not healthy to keep it there over time. Having a heart rate that's higher than what it normally is is stress. And long-term stress is unhealthy. It's also difficult to mitigate and manage once our bodies are used to being in a constant state of stress.

But when we allow ourselves to feel the full range of emotions and then make a choice to put our focus on something else, we help our bodies move out of that stress response. And, when we're able to do that with someone else—either as the person sharing or as the person listening—we have a greater connection with that person.

I asked my friends and connections on Facebook about this idea of toxic positivity and what their experiences were with it. I'd like to share some of their comments.

One woman noted that we should call failure what it really is without jumping straight to calling it a “learning opportunity.” She writes, “Hell, yes, you’re going to learn and avoid that next time. But that shit wasn’t just a ‘learning opportunity.’ It was a failure. Don’t be scared of that.” She writes that we should allow ourselves to feel lousy, “even if for an hour or two, or a week or two, or a lifetime of being able to look at something and say, ‘That was a failure, and I still feel badly about it.’” She writes that that’s showing empathy for yourself and for others.

A woman who is a cancer survivor writes that she doesn’t think happiness is something you search for. Rather, she thinks that happiness is part of the human experience. She writes, “No one is happy all the time.” She also writes that her thoughts can physically affect her health. Anxiety tightens her body, and she gets a headache. But she rejects the idea that someone can “think themselves into getting cancer.” Or that “If I was happy, I wouldn’t have had cancer.” She does comment, though, that her attitude helped her get through her cancer treatments. She also writes that the relentless pursuit of happiness “takes away from what life is. Life is messy, sad, wrenching, happy, exciting, beautiful...”

Another woman writes, “My appreciation of the times I am genuinely happy is possible because I have experiences—fully immersed and honest experiences—sadness, grief, disappointment, and more. If all I ever focus on is trying to be happy, it will become meaningless and I’ll be missing the full breadth of living.”

She also notes the elitism that is part of this relentless pursuit of happiness. “Someone living in an abusive household, living with health issues they can’t treat for lack of access to healthcare, living with food insecurity, and many more situations, needs to focus on survival. Only when your attention is not solely devoted to your day-to-day survival can you get all live-laugh-love and do this relentless pursuit of happiness.”

This speaks to Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, where psychologist Abraham Maslow teaches how we can’t work on self-actualization until our basic needs are met. These basic needs include physical needs—such as health and food—and safety needs—such as shelter and freedom from war and physical conflict. So, this pressure to seek joy or to be happy all the time is elitist in the sense that you have to have all of your basic needs met before you can pursue happiness. How can you pursue happiness if you live in the middle of war? How can you pursue happiness in an abusive relationship? How can you pursue happiness when you don’t have enough food on the table?

Back to Facebook. Another woman writes that accepting and labeling bad things helps us to recognize good things. This also helps to ground us—reminding us that we’re human.

One man commented that he was perpetually unhappy when he was growing up. Now in his early 50s, he can “smile easily and laugh easily, and sometimes even cry.” And yet he writes that “my life is arguably much worse.” His wife died of cancer “out of the blue.” He has multiple sclerosis and can’t work. “But I’m happy.” He notes, “But even if I don’t have everything I want, I want the things I have, and even though I am in constant pain, I like my life.”

Several people, especially those of us who knew him in high school, asked how he made this change from unhappy to happy, particularly given his circumstances in adulthood. He writes that it was a shift of mindset. He doesn’t elaborate. He said that he thought it would detract from the conversation. Ugh. Not at all! But I wonder if that shift was actually a choice to focus on something else in the moment, while still feeling his true feelings.

One woman who has breast cancer had the immediate thought upon her diagnosis that she had caused it—even though she’s a doctor and “knows better”! She writes that she agrees “that some of this happiness talk leads to guilt.” She has been working on her shift in mindset by focusing on the little things in a day: “A butterfly, a flower, a good deed, laughter.” This is what Ettenberg does in the spinal fluid leak article.

This woman with breast cancer writes on Facebook that those things can “help redirect negative thinking. Appreciating the little things can’t help pull you up from the depths of darkness relating to illness (including mental illness), the death of a loved one, or other tragedies/huge challenges in life, but it can help for a healthier perspective at baseline.” She also finds helpful the idea from the high-school classmate I mentioned earlier about “not having everything you want but wanting the things you have.”

Finally, one woman commented that the media seem to push us—particularly girls and women—into this relentless pursuit of happiness, pushing us into thinking that we have to be happy all of the time. We see this coming from social media influencers, as well. Though I have been noticing a shift here to telling people that it’s okay to feel all of your feelings. Still, there is so much more about finding the silver lining.

This woman and I discussed how a lot of advertising is about being happy. If you’re not happy, buy this product to make you happy. She also writes about “the system” being geared toward

having us suppress our emotions and focus only on pursuing happiness. That reminds me of books and movies that have characters (meaning us) taking drugs to kill our emotions—to stay just slightly north of neutral. Never sad, but not too happy. Happy enough to stay active, compliant, and wanting to buy stuff. In Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World*, you have people taking Soma to increase happiness. In Lois Lowry’s *The Giver*, people start taking a drug at the first sign of puberty to stop what she calls the “stirrings.” This drug suppresses all emotions. In *Matrix Resurrections*, you have Thomas Anderson taking blue pills to stay neutral, unwittingly compliant, and essentially asleep.

This was such a great dialogue on Facebook. I was so happy with how many people spoke up and shared their perspectives. I got several private messages, as well, from people who didn’t want to share publicly for various reasons. So, I won’t share those here either. But they had fascinating insight about how toxic positivity has affected their lives and also how a shift in focus has helped them stop wallowing.

Actually, one other thing that came up in the Facebook conversation was the 2015 Pixar movie “Inside Out.” If you haven’t seen it, it’s about an 11-year-old girl named Riley who has just moved with her family from the Midwest to San Francisco. She is figuring out how to deal with a new city, a new house, and a new school. We see a lot of this going on in her mind in the form of five personified emotions—literally characters in the film: Joy, Fear, Sadness, Anger, and Disgust. Joy is beautifully played by Amy Poehler and is the emotion that runs things in Riley’s head. Sadness is played by Phyllis Smith, who is known for her roles in *The Office* and *The OA*.

The friend who brought this up on Facebook uses the film as an example of “the dangers of joy run amok.” She writes that “trying to banish sadness leads to the girl flatlining emotionally.”

Banishing Sadness is exactly what Joy does in the movie. Joy sees Sadness as not making any positive contribution to Riley’s life. Naturally, Joy sees Sadness as merely a downer and nothing more. When Riley has a problem, Joy’s solution is more joy.

An article in Greater Good Magazine called “[Four Lessons from ‘Inside Out’ to Discuss With Kids](#)” comments that when Riley starts to run away from home, it’s Sadness that makes her change her mind. The author writes that when Riley reunites with her family, she experiences “a deeper sense of happiness and contentment in the comfort she gets from her parents, even though it’s mixed with sadness and fear.” What I remember from the movie is that Sadness

allows Riley to reminisce. She remembers happy *and* sad times with her family. And that makes her decide that she doesn't in fact want to run away.

Another article in Greater Good Magazine called "Variety Is the Spice of Emotional Life" discusses several studies from over the decades that show that "emodiversity" is healthier than a simple focus on happiness. That is, these studies have found that feeling the full range of human emotions is healthier than trying to feel nothing but happiness. So, banishing Sadness, suppressing emotions, or prioritizing Joy actually leads to greater unhappiness. The author writes that "cultivating a diversity of emotions—positive or negative—can make us happier and healthier."

In fact, in a study called "Can Seeking Happiness Make People Happy? Paradoxical Effects of Valuing Happiness," researchers found that when you have a high expectation of happiness, the search for happiness can actually make you *unhappy*. The investigators argue that "the more people value happiness, the more likely they are to be disappointed."

They conducted two studies, both of which supported their hypothesis. In the first study, they found that women who already place a high value on happiness reported lower happiness when they were experiencing lower levels of stress in life. In the second study, they experimentally induced women participants to value happiness. These women ended up reacting less positively to what the investigators call a "happy emotion induction." That is, when the researchers gave the participants a reason to be happy, these women didn't react as positively as you might have expected. So, the investigators found in both studies that "valuing happiness may lead people to be less happy just when happiness is within reach."

I want you to hear from my friend, Denise Dee. She teaches a class called Tell Your Story in which she helps people both write their story and feel all of their feelings. It's both a writing class and a class in getting to the root of who you really are. Denise has a no-B.S. way with people. And she's excellent at drawing emotions out of people.

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Kelly:

Welcome, Denise, thank you so much for being here today.

Denise:

I'm excited to be here. Thank you for asking me to come and talk with you and your audience.

Kelly:

Absolutely. So can you tell us a little bit about your program Tell Your Story.

Denise:

Yeah, I created tell your story after years of being in what I'll call spiritual-business coaching programs, where everything was centered on fixing or healing something about people. And I ended up being back in a writing community where people just really wanted to hear all the grittiness of a story that, you know, without trying to fix it or heal it. And I saw how valuable that was for me. Because when I'm in a group, where I feel as if I have to censor myself, you know, or me being me, I'm probably not going to censor myself. But then I start to think I'm alienating people, you know, like, they're, I see the look that they're giving me when I'm talking about certain feelings that I want to, I want to create a space, and I call it a brave space where people can come in and say whatever it is that they need to say with an audience that wants to hear what they have to say. And I find that the weight, walking around with the weight of your untold story on you is devastating. And I'm really great at listening to people tell me whatever it is that they want to tell me without prejudging if it's bad or good, and asking them questions to get deeper into the feelings that they don't want to feel.

Kelly:

That sounds awesome. So you just said that you have worried about alienating people by speaking your truth or speaking about difficult feelings. And that's so interesting, because I just shared all of this information how holding back our true feelings can actually be alienating and isolating, and how in trying to push people into silver-lining thinking is really alienating and isolating. So, it's interesting that we go into these situations, thinking that, "Oh, if I share how I'm really feeling, I'm going to push people away." And that certainly does happen at times. I mean, we've both experienced that. But it also opens the opportunity for greater connection, when we share how we're really feeling and, and, thus, who we really are.

Denise:

So, something I've been looking at over these past couple weeks a lot, because I'm in the final weeks of this round of Tell Your Story. And I hear what you're saying on that about it. And I teach that, right, I teach that. And I try to limit in most of my life about knowing that this can open up space to make a deeper connection. And there's still that part from when.... I don't know about you, or what you share with your audience about when you were younger, but there were just certain things that I was told not to talk about, you know, like, secrets that I had to keep. And there's taboo subjects. So, I know that it's going to connect me possibly with people who are open to hearing those kinds of things. But sometimes I, I don't want to limit myself to why I only want to be friends with or only when people that open up to me that you know understand about mental illness or shooting drugs or whatever it may be, you know. So, I think there's that, that push and pull.

I'll give you a specific example here on, last weekend I went to see this opera called "Fire Shut Up in Your Bones" [screen live virtually] I know we're on a time limit here. So, I won't go into the whole story. But you know, it was a basically a story of a man who had been sexually abused when he was a seven-year-old boy, and the things that he was walking around with inside himself from that. And then he had gotten to a point where he realized things can no longer go on as they have been, I have to do something, I have to say something or do something. Okay. So I'm going through this, you know, it's I'm going through sitting there watching this, and it's devastating. There's so many moments that are devastating, it's beautiful, there's all kinds of feelings, they're not holding back at all. And it gets to the end and the performers come out and they're doing a curtain call and it's just like being there live. And I'm clapping ecstatically you know, and then that lump in my throat starts coming.

And when I was a girl, if I had that lump in my throat, you know, I'd get this death glare from my mother, you know, like, "Don't cry, don't fall apart," you know. I'm 63 now. I know you know, like, still noticing like I have this feeling that I just want run to the restroom and bawl, even though I bawled many a time in my life in a room full of people. So, even now even teaching this stuff, there still can be this, you know, "I want to be me," you know. I'm going to do this thing and what if I get in trouble? You know, what if I get punished for doing this?

So, it's so fascinating to have a venue like a theater or a place where you're writing a story, or your website, you know, where you can be, where you can put yourself out there, and let all those feelings come in, not just well, "This is what I say that I teach and have to be this all the time, or no one's going to trust me or believe me." You know. Because that's not me all the time.

That's, maybe that's why it's the heart of my life's work, because that's the work that I needed to do, to not only feel all those feelings, but to feel all those feelings and also feel the conflicting feelings that come up when I'm feeling those feelings as a, as an older woman than how I felt when I was anywhere in my life before now.

Kelly:

Yeah, and how we're raised within our families, but then also by society, that really sticks with us. It is really hard to get over and to teach ourselves a new way of being and doing, as you know from teaching this course. And something that I know that you do in it is when people read their stories or their scenes, you know, what they've written—you don't allow feedback from other students in the class, do you?

Denise:

I do not. Correct.

Kelly:

And I bring that up because when I just mentioned earlier about sharing our feelings with other people allows the opportunity for greater connection with them, but that's not what's going on in your class. Isn't it more that it's creating? And maybe I'm wrong, so correct me. But would it be that your students are connecting more with their true selves?

Denise:

One of them just said a very beautiful thing to me or wrote a very beautiful thing to me about, we do it on a conference line, not a video line. So they're not even seeing each other, you know. And she said, "Denise, it's like speaking into the void. And I can really hear myself and it's still scary, right?" Because, you know that there's people listening, but you can't see them. I thought that was so such a beautiful description of the experience, because it's not about getting affirmed, or, "Oh, that was great," you know. Or, "Here's a Kleenex" when you start to cry, you know. What's happened sometimes in other things that I was in, where, as soon as you're getting deep, you know, the people that are uncomfortable with going deep are trying to pull out of it. And I feel like it's very powerful to stand there and speak and not in a venue where you're going to be judged immediately by applause, or lack of applause, you know? You get to

hear yourself. And eventually I feel, moving through Tell Your Story, and anyone doing this in their own way, when there's silence, when you're doing that in silence, you, not only do hear yourself, you feel it in your body. And your body doesn't lie. Your body knows what's true. A line can be beautifully written, but all of a sudden, you can't say it because you know that it's you're just like, that's just not true.

Kelly:

So, I loved what you said earlier that you create a brave space. You know, we hear so much about safe space. And, like, to me, a safe space is not where you go to avoid being triggered. To me a safe space is where you, is where you go to, to really express yourself, you know, not in like a racist, sexist way, whatever. Like, that's not what I mean. But to express who you really are, you know, to express those feelings. But I really like your phrasing, a brave space, because you do have to be brave to do that, to express who you really are and how you really feel.

Denise:

Yeah, it's risky, right? And in a, and I'm not anti-safe space, right. But that just didn't fit for me and what I was trying to do it the moment that I created it. Sometimes safe spaces, and I live in San Francisco, sometimes safe spaces are, have a definition around them, you know? Like, okay, it's safe for this, this, and this. But it might not be safe to talk about some taboo things or things that may make other people think that you're some certain type of way. Where, as a writer, we have to be able, a writer or a person that's using the tools of writing, you have to be able to let yourself go somewhere in that writing that you normally wouldn't. Or, if you're writing in a character, that character has to be able to do and say things that you wouldn't to do. Otherwise, there's no growth. There's no movement. Everything's gonna sound exactly like you. I'm saying these things, even if I'm not saying them, right? So you don't want to express something that's so-called negative feeling or not positive and your posture can be saying it, you know? The undertone of what the tone of it, you're saying something quite positive, but the tone of it, we can all hear the anger under that, you know, or the bitterness or the frustration, or the rage, or the sadness, or whatever it is.

Kelly:

I love what you said about our bodies show it. I gave an example earlier about when my ex and I split nearly five years ago. And I got to the point where I was just telling people, "Oh, it's fine,

I'm fine with it." And, as you know, I wasn't for the longest time, but, and I'm sure people could see it in me. But there were too many people who were trying to silverline it. And and I just couldn't deal with that. So, it's like, "Well, fine, I just won't even tell you how I feel." And that, that's not healthy, you know? That was suppressing what I, what was going on. But I had you to talk to, so I was okay.

Denise:

As you're saying that, I realized I have an example of what may seem like a reverse example. And still in line with the, "It happened for a reason, they did the best that they could."

So, as I alluded to earlier, my father was schizophrenic. And when he was alive, you know, I made my mother the villain, the witch, you know, this control-freak, yada, yada, yada, you know. And I was, like, my father's protector. And when he died, all this anger came up. I was so angry, you know, so angry, because how could you be angry at him and a schizophrenic mentally-ill man. You know? How could you be? And when that, when I was expressing that to, and these were close friends of mine, these weren't random people I met, you know? Maybe I should have expressed this to random people I met on the street, but, to a person, "He did the best that he could, he loved you in his own way," you know? And I'm like, "Fuck you," you know? "Fuck you. I want my father. Okay?" I know that.

That's a story I told myself my whole life to not make it hurt, to not feel how much I wanted, you know? Yeah, love. And I had to feel that, to really authentically be able to get to that place of, they did the best that they could if, or whatever the version of that was, you know, yeah. But until then, like, I'm telling myself this stuff because as a means of protection, because I don't want to feel, because it's selfish to want someone that's mentally ill to focus on you. You know, like, "Wow, he has all these problems, and you're so self-centered, you're concerned about if someone loves you or not." But that little girl in me wanted a father that showed her in a way that she understood, you know, that he loves her.

Kelly:

And, like you said, you can get to that place of accepting that he did the best that he could later, after you have felt that anger, betrayal, disappointment, whatever you're feeling. You have to feel all of that first.

Denise:

I feel for me, like that phrase, as you're using toxic positivity, and we, we see this in writing where people want their story to be inspirational or to have a lesson, like, why would anyone care if it doesn't have a lesson, you know? But it's a way to shield yourself from, "Well, this just happened. So, I could have a lesson from it," which means that you're not feeling all those things. And then it's a shallow experience for the, in the audience to see someone. We never saw how bad it hurt them. We never saw how much they wanted something and, all of a sudden, you know, like, and then this great thing happened, you know, and it's a cheap pay. There's no real payoff, you know? That toxic positivity of "Let me wrap this up in a silver lining lesson." If it's true, I wouldn't have any problem with it. It wouldn't be toxic because we all feel that. That was true for that person. But when they're saying something, and it's not true, it just, you just, you just don't trust them.

Kelly:

So, what would you have people do writing-wise? I mean, what do you have your students do? What is it, why is it so important to write through... it's not about writing through your feelings because this isn't journaling, correct?

Denise:

Yeah. And I'm glad I'm glad you brought that up because I, what I find in my experience of working with people who are, and I love journaling for what it's for. But, in trying to find your untold story.... So, if we're having them write, if I'm having them write not to explain it, but to feel it. And sometimes journaling, to me, we're explaining why this happened. "This happened because I didn't pay attention to my gut when such and such," right?

So, one of the one of the things that I feel that people get out of writing when they're not looking to explain a moment, but they're making the moment come alive. So, you go into that moment, this is the thing that you can do. You can pick out a moment from your life that feels like a significant moment, whether it feels as if you felt it all the way, or it's something that you're holding in a bit in your body. And you go to that moment, and you write it as if you were the age that you were when that moment is happening. And to bring it more to life. If you hear yourself explaining it, then you have to stop and go into, "How was I feeling, was that little five-year-old girl saying he did the best that he could know? How did she feel? How was I feeling?"

Another good technique is what happened in the moment before that moment? Because you and I were talking about that sometimes we fell wildly in love with someone, you know? Or we got it in our heads to do some kind of adventure. And we were head-over-heels and it was fabulous, you know? And then it goes south. And when we tell the story from that moment onward, we're foreshadowing the bad thing that happened. And we're not reveling in the greatness of that moment. So, people will tell me, "Oh, I was always like that. It was always sad. They they never loved me. He was, he's a narcissist." You know? I'm like, "Well, give me the moment before that you realize it was [...] a narcissist," and really make us feel that moment so we can feel the loss when they turned however it was that they turned or you turned however it was that you turned.

Kelly:

I love that about looking at the moment before feeling the moment before.

Denise:

Yeah, I think we don't want to talk about how afraid we are, too, of "If I really feel," you know, it's gonna open up all kinds of things. It's not if I really feel, if I'm really in the moment, it's just all going to be positive, because that's what some of those books would tell you, you know? But that's, that's not always true. You know, you're in, when you really go back, and you're in the moment of that, if you have the moment, if the moment is frozen in anger, like, that's the way you remembered it, because that's the way you want to remember it for whatever reason, so you don't get hurt or, and then you go under that. You have to open up. You'll have to feel that feeling that you don't want to feel to get to what's under it and not an explanation, the feeling that's under it.

Kelly:

That makes sense. That would make such a big difference. I know that you really like action, like taking action, encouraging your clients take action, which I really do too, you know, in my former life as a as a life coach. So, do you have any advice for listeners to help them feel difficult feelings, you know, without wallowing, and then move into action? Or is this a time when you don't think taking action is necessary.

Denise:

My perspective, and watching the students in my Tell Your Story program, is what we're wallowing in a story. When people actually feel, the feeling that they didn't want to feel, there's generally no wallowing involved at all. So, they're wallowing in a story. I'm wallowing in the story about how awful that was to be a child with my father being an alcoholic, you know? I'm wallowing in the hope, the helplessness that I wasn't able to make him leave, you know, or make something different happen.

So, I think that's important to mention that we're really, when we're really, when we really get to the feeling that we don't want to feel, if we're wallowing, we're not at the feeling that we don't want to feel. We were talking about explaining a bit earlier. And I was talking about how I feel explaining is protection, because this, you know, freezing us in a reason, or toxic positivity for why we did something.

So, a realization or an explanation about why this happened to me as an aha. And then we feel like we did something because we know it, we know it, we now know something. So, we feel like something happened. And we have an aha that rarely leads to action or doing something differently. So, a breakthrough has to involve action. So, when you're in one of those moments when you're writing and you're doing a scene that you got to bring in an action to make things happen. If you're just sitting there going, "Well then I thought I said this, you said this, I said that, she said this," well, you gotta, you got to put some action in there. You got to raise the stakes by putting action in.

So, you can look at that in your writing or in your life until an action happens. The stakes aren't going to get raised. And I understand some people are afraid of the stakes being raised. So, they'll sit there for another five years and won't take action until the time is right. And in writing, you know, we're raising the stakes. We go with it, and then the next page, we can start another scene. This is a good practice for this thing that never happened in my life, I'm going to make it happen on the page. I'm going to take the action, I'm going to commit, I'm going to make a choice. I'm going to take the action and see what happens. And that can lead to true breakthroughs in your life, not just an aha.

Kelly:

That makes sense. And if I'm correct, you are having your students rewrite what really happened. Is that right? If they need to, okay. So, like you said, they can have their character say what they didn't say, or do what they didn't do?

Denise:

Yes. What really happened gets in the way, you know, because people get to that spot where the scene stuck or what they're writing is stuck. And it's like, "Well, what about if you, what about if you just shove your mother off that chair?" "Well, that didn't happen." Well, do it and see what happens. Let's just see what happens. And something always happens after the character knew, as the character does something that didn't get that didn't happen in life.

We just boxed ourselves in. "What if my brother reads this, and they say, 'That's not true,' you know? Or, "What my mother reads this?" Or whoever. "What am I, what's my husband gonna think, if I write this thing?" You know? And it's a, it's not their story. So, it's going to be different in their own story and be, you don't have to give them that thing to read.

But in the moment, the creating, giving space for you to bring in an element that didn't happen. It's going to unfreeze the feeling. I really encourage people to be, to stay in an uncomfortable moment in their writings. And, if you want to do that in your life, stay in an uncomfortable moment in your life and not try to fill the space up with words or to make someone feel better or fix them or hand them a Kleenex, you know, just, this is uncomfortable. And I'm going to stay here I'm going to leave the audience in this uncomfortable moment or in this senseless moment, because something's going to happen from that moment, where, as soon as we start papering over it with explanations and reasons, it stops a moment.

Kelly:

Well, thank you so much. This has been really wonderful. I appreciate all of your insights and your suggestions here.

Denise:

You are welcome. If anyone wants to send me anything that comes up from them when they write, I'd love to hear it.

Kelly:

I have your website URL in the show notes and on this episode's page on my website, so people will have a way to get in touch with you.

Denise:

Awesome, thank you. I had a blast, and I hope people are, I know they got, I know they're getting things out of your newsletters and your podcast because I certainly am. So, I hope that this one joins the, joins in with the ones that people are getting something out of. Thank you for having me.

Kelly:

Well, thank you!

—

To start to close here, let's discuss this idea of seeing every moment as a choice—from the Ettenberg article about the spinal fluid leak.

When we experience a difficult feeling, we need to fully be with it first. Acknowledge it and feel it. Then we have the choice to wallow in that feeling or to shift our focus to something else.

Let's take our businesses as an example. Say you had a great chat with a potential client. They seem like the perfect fit. You sent them an awesome proposal. Everything felt right. Then they tell you they're sorry, but they've decided to go with someone else.

Naturally, you're upset and disappointed. In the past, I've had people say, "Oh, you'll get the next one," or, "This one just wasn't the right one for you."

Well, if they didn't hire me, they *must* not have been the right one, or they would have hired me! Duh. But they sure *felt* like the right one. And how do *you* know that I'll get the next one? What if I *don't* get the next one?

Is this doom-and-gloom thinking? No. It's a totally normal way to feel. And those comments aren't at all helpful because it might have fabulous to work that person, and you *don't* actually know that you'll get the next one.

So, what do you do?

You let yourself feel disappointed, upset, worried, however you feel. Then you choose what to do from there. And it doesn't have to be instantaneous. As in, you don't have to get back to making calls or writing emails right away. Feel your feelings for however long it takes: Two minutes, 5 minutes, an hour, then get back to work. If that's how it works for you, then great! But it probably takes longer than that.

The point is that you're not going to stay in those feelings. You're not going to get stuck thinking that you're a failure or that your business won't succeed.

Feel what you feel, then choose what to focus on instead.

Do you have another client whose work you could get back to? Do you have another potential client to reach out to? Do you have a blog post you could get back to writing? Do you have a content calendar you could be working on?

You're going to find something else to focus on so that you don't get stuck wallowing in negative thinking. This doesn't mean that you're going to force positive thinking or affirmations on yourself.

Yes, affirmations do work for some people. I'm definitely not saying that they're a bad thing. And you would certainly want to train your brain away from negative thinking.

But our brains are constantly looking for proof of our thoughts. Taking action is the best way to back up affirmations.

For example, "My ideal client wants to hire me." First of all, yes, they wouldn't be your ideal client if they didn't want to hire you! Second, not a great affirmation because you can't control what other people do. Third, if you still want this as an affirmation, then take actions that show your brain that you're doing things to make it easier for your ideal client to hire you. What things? Stuff that I mentioned earlier: Reaching out to potential clients, writing blog posts,

writing a newsletter, creating social media posts, checking up on your search engine optimization.—anything that can lead to your ideal client finding you and then hiring you.

If you want to do affirmations, what would be a better one to try? Something like, “I’m capable of attracting my ideal client.” Now *that’s* something you can actively work on: Creating content for your blog and podcast, writing a newsletter, reaching out to potential clients, making sure your SEO is in working order, updating your brand. You get the idea. You have no control over your ideal client. But you do have control over the actions you take to attract them.

What else can you focus on? Like some of my Facebook friends write and like Ettenberg writes in the spinal fluid leak article, you can feel your feelings then focus on small moments of beauty. I find it particularly interesting that this advice comes from people with chronic illness. And I think it’s great advice for everyone.

To be honest, part of me saw this idea as being a bit pollyannish. Sort of like saying, “Well, all this shit is really bad, but at least I’ve got these beautiful flowers.” But it’s not that at all. It’s really saying, “Okay, all of this shit is really, *and* I can still enjoy how beautiful these flowers are.” That’s a significant difference. Like my friend with multiple sclerosis who was unhappy as a child but who’s happy with his life now, we can sit in the shit without wallowing in it. We can notice that awesome dandelion growing up out of the muck—yeah, literally and figuratively. As two of my Facebook friends said, we may not have everything we want, but we can want the things that we have.

Is that a form of naïve gratitude, the kind that can lead to toxic positivity? Only if we force ourselves to be grateful before we allow ourselves to feel. Plus, neither they nor I said, “Be thankful for the things we have.” We are saying, “*Want* the things we have.”

Ha ha ha ha ha! Maybe that’s a bit of the whole Marie Kondo thing about “what doesn’t bring you joy.” Oh, the irony! Yeah, but getting rid of physical things that don’t bring you joy is not at all the same as trying to get rid of emotions that don’t bring you joy. Remember the studies that show that emodiversity actually makes you healthier *and* happier. Getting rid of physical things that don’t bring us joy may be a fine way to declutter our physical space. Getting rid of *emotions* that don’t bring us joy is a terrible way to try to declutter our emotional space. Just don’t do it!

To conclude, is there anything wrong with this relentless pursuit of happiness? Is it *wrong* to want to be happy? Of course it’s not wrong. Of course we all want to be happy. Happy feels

good. There are so many things that we do to make ourselves happy. And yet isn't it interesting that so many studies over the decades have shown that people and non-human animals are more motivated by pain avoidance than they are by pleasure seeking? I find that so fascinating. It makes me wonder how much of the pursuit of happiness is pleasure seeking rather than pain avoidance.

My 10th-grade English teacher, Mr. Don Thames, said that happiness should not be the goal of life. I don't remember what he said *should* be the goal of life. One classmate remembers it as "to find your purpose." Another remembers it as "to seek excellence." I'm wondering if there has to be goal of life at all.

Ralph Waldo Emerson writes in the poem "The Rhodora, On Being Asked, Whence is the Flower":

*Rhodora! if the sages ask thee why
This charm is wasted on the earth and sky,
Tell them, dear, that, if eyes were made for seeing,
Then beauty is its own excuse for Being;*

Perhaps the purpose of life is simply To Be.

I agree with Mr. Thames in that I don't think the goal of life should be happiness. If we are constantly seeking happiness, then we would be avoiding the rest of the human experience. And we run the risk of viewing everything that does not make us happy as a failure.

I think that To Be means to be fully in the moment, to feel everything that we feel and not suppress any of it.

When Hamlet ponders "to be, or not to be: that is the question," he is literally questioning whether to live or die. I think this applies metaphorically to our emotions. When we don't fully feel all of our emotions, we are emotionally dead. We aren't being fully human. We lose connection to other people. That's not living. That's not *being*.

So, yeah, happiness isn't the goal of life. And I think, if there's a goal at all, that it is simply To Be.

Thank *you* for being here today!

I'd love to read your thoughts on this episode. You can leave comments on this episode's post on my website — AKS Design Studio dot com.

I'll be back next week with more branding, design, and business tips.

See you next time on Brand + Design Scoop!

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[Link to this episode](#)



Angela Kelly Smith provides custom Squarespace websites, branding strategy, and marketing instruction so freelancers and entrepreneurs can run a successful business while spending more time focusing on the work they really love doing.