

My Life Is Awesome, so Why Can't I Enjoy It?

Laurie Santos: I'm going to talk you through what the science of psychology says about that and they kind of ways that you can use the science of psychology to maybe enjoy your life and have it flourish a little bit more. But we only talk about your lives. I want to talk about some other folks is lives. Um, for example, right now across the world, there are folks whose lives aren't going so well. Um, in Chennai, in India, uh, one of the large cities there, they're facing a water shortage such that folks are really in water crisis waiting hours and hours for water, drinking dirty water and so on. [inaudible] is a city that's five times the population of San Francisco and they can't bust in enough water, right? So that's happening over in India, uh, cross on the other side of the world. We have other kinds of bad things happening, like food crises.

Laurie Santos: You take Venezuela, a country of what, three 30 million people or so where they're in food shortages because of economic and political problems such that folks who have access to food get overrun with folks who need it. And so on. Um, even closer to home here we have folks who are not living such great lives. Tens of thousands of folks are in one of 200 different detention centers where they're separated from families don't have access to soap and water and things like that. Uh, don't even have the freedom to leave. And sadly these are often folks who are facing food and water crises in their home countries and tried to come for something better and now they're there. And so I started with these examples to point out there are lots of folks who are like not having great lives, right? Who's materially, economically, politically are facing enormous challenges that are huge hits to their wellbeing.

Laurie Santos: But that's not what's going on in this room, right? Like your life is not like this. You could right now walk to the back of this room and get a glass of water. You could right now like run up the hill I think and go to the general mills food area and eat unlimited cereal, right. To the folks in those situations around the world. Like your life just doesn't seem really, really awesome. It seems like mind boggling that you could have that much luxury and that much privilege and that's just the water and the food, right? It's not talking about the material luxuries that we could calculate if we really went around the room and looked at your salaries and things like that. And so this to me is a big paradox, right? I'm not in a room of refugees and folks who are in water crisis who want to talk about what they can do to enjoy their lives more.

Laurie Santos: I'm in a room of folks with incredible privilege who are still kind of not feeling it, who feel like there's something missing. This is a big paradox for me in part because I talked to lots of rooms like this and I work at a place where I deal with issues like this myself. Um, as some of you heard, I'm a professor at this wonderful institution at Yale. This is a place that many students dream about going in high school, right? Where we have like, you know, 10 times more students that are applying than we could possibly admit. You'd think that once

the EI students got to yell, their lives would just be made. It would be perfect and fantastic, but as both a professor and a head of college, they're on campus. That's not what I'm seeing on the ground. I'm seeing incredible disappointment about students' lives, incredible anxieties about the future, and even suicidal ideation that I couldn't believe till I got into the trenches and saw students up close and personal.

Laurie Santos: But this isn't just true at, yeah, like this is a, this is a phenomenon that we're seeing across the country. Some of you who are here at my talk at Aspen last year saw some scary statistics. I'll kind of update them, but these are the kinds of mental health problems we're seeing on college campuses in the u s worldwide. He's come from a recent national college health assessment from 2008 and this is what's happening to our young people nationally. So over 40% of college students nationally report being so depressed, it's difficult to function over 40%. Over 50% say that they regularly feel hopeless. A lot of the time, over 60% report feeling very lonely. Just kind of ironic because they're on campuses with tons of other people their age, but they report feeling lonely. Um, almost two thirds say that they experienced overwhelming anxiety most of the time.

Laurie Santos: Over 80% say that they constantly feel overwhelmed by all they have to do an incredibly stressed and this manifest in like even worse mental health outcomes such that today over 12% of college students say that they've seriously considered suicide in the last year. More than one in 10. That would be like, like 50 people in this room, right? If we're looking at my students, so this is awful. These are this, these are us college students. Maybe not as privileged as the folks in this room, but they are by and large, young, healthy, not refugees, not facing food prices and water crises and so on. We've given them incredible material affluence, but they're missing something. And so this is a paradox that social psychologists have worried a lot about. I'll give you one kind of quote on this. This comes from the positive psychologist David Myers, who has a whole book on this paradox, which he calls the American paradox.

Laurie Santos: Here's what he has to say about it. Compared with their grandparents, today's young adults have grown up with much more affluence, slightly less happiness, and much greater risk of depression. And assorted social pathologies he goes on to say are becoming much better off over the last four decades has not been accompanied by one iota of increased subjective wellbeing. And this is a puzzle like around Aspen Ideas Institute. We're going to be talking about what we can do to decrease inequality, to give people a material leg up to help folks. But it seems like once you get there, you're not as happy as you think. That doesn't necessarily buy you wellbeing. And that raises a huge question. The question is like, what is going on? Again? Why do you like hundreds of you who have incredible privilege have to come to this talk, right? And there's probably lots of different answers.

Laurie Santos: If I was in a different field than psychology, I might give you different ones, but because I'm a psychologist, I'm going to give you the answer that makes

incredible sense to me, which is that the problem has to do with our minds, our minds, quite frankly, they kind of suck. They suck completely. You know, you have this wonderful brain that allows us to think about amazing ideas and to think about the future and to plan things and so on. But many aspects of our mind kind of don't work in the way that we'd like. And it turns out that our mind is filled with a ton of little glitches that make it hard to enjoy the great things that we have. Those are the glitches that make you not appreciate the kinds of privileges that so many of you have in this room. And so that raises a different question, which is like, okay, our minds kind of suck.

Laurie Santos: They're really glitchy. Let's fix them. What can we do? And the sad thing is, at least right now, the answer is we probably can't really do anything to fix them like they're there in our brain. Maybe we can do some like genetic stuff down the line, but for most of us we're going to be walking around with these little meat organs in our brain that are kind of messing us up. And so that kind of gives us a different way to deal with it, which is like, we're not going to fix our minds. We can't just shut off these kinds of biases that I'm talking about, but we can understand them if we understand our dumb minds, if we understand the glitches that make us not appreciate the stuff we can thwart those glitches, we can try to use the biases of our mind for us and we can do a little bit better and use that kind of thing to enjoy our life a little bit more.

Laurie Santos: And so this was the logic behind why I decided to teach this class back at Yale. I realize, my gosh, my students are not appreciating things. This is awful. We're in the midst of this mental health crisis. Maybe if I could teach them a little bit about how their minds work, give them a sense of what these glitches are and how they could overcome them, maybe things would get better. And so I decided to develop a completely new class. I called it something really sexy. So lots of students would take it and I didn't want to call it, you're like understand your mind or something. I, I call it psychology and the good life, this promise of using my field to kind of live a better life. And you know, I put the class together not really knowing what was gonna happen. And some of you who are here last year heard a little bit about what happened, which is that it became the largest class ever and yells history in the end.

Laurie Santos: Just around one out of every four students at Yale were taking the class, which I think tells us a couple things. One is that the young people today don't like the fact that they're in the midst of this mental health crisis and they want to do something about it. I think the second thing it tells us is that we realize that there might be an answer in the science, like maybe if we understood our minds better, we would know how to work with them. This is a mental problem, not a material, good problem or an economic problem. It has to do with how our preferences and how we relate to the things that we have. And so I think just the viralness of this class on campus suggested this is an important thing to understand. And so today I want to give you the very shortest possible crash course version of the class that I can do only in a half hour.

Laurie Santos: And that means when we think about the glitches of our mind, we're going to have to narrow it down a lot. And so today I'm just going to walk through in a lot of detail, two ways that I think your mind sucks. That means that makes for the fact that you're not enjoying life as much as you could. But more importantly, I'm going to walk through a couple pro tips about the kinds of things you can do about it. Not to get rid of these glitches because again, what the research and cognitive science suggests that those glitches are just going to be there. You're not going to get rid of them, but you can work with them. Their strategies you can use to do a little bit better. And so the first glitch we're going to talk about in our mind, one that really plagues me because I see it everywhere, is the idea that one reason we're not as happy as we could be is that our minds get used to stuff.

Laurie Santos: We don't really realize it. It seems like a kind of fundamental way that our minds work and it turns out if you take like a basic psychology class, like your psych 101 you'll see lots of cases of our minds getting used to stuff. One set of famous cases or what researchers refer to as perceptual adaptation. You know this, if there was kind of a loud sound of this room when you first came in, it might be annoying, but over time you would kind of get used to it, right? Here's lots of visual illusions that prey on this. I'll show you one. Um, so play along with me wherever you're sitting. Try to look at the screen and look at this image for a little while. Really try to stare at it in the middle as closely as possible, and I'll leave it up just for a second or so, and then you watch what happens when I take it away.

Laurie Santos: If you're like most people, you might see a little flash of a different set of colors there. That wasn't some crazy gifts that I did in my PowerPoint. That was your visual system. Your visual system got used to the colors that were on the screen. It was expecting the Greens and the yellows and the blacks, and when it went away it kind of got confused like, oh wait, that must mean there's some other color there now, right? It got so used to those colors. It saw the opposite when they went away. All right. This is the phenomenon of perceptual adaptation. We just get so used to stuff that we tend to ignore it over time. When it goes away, we're like, wait, what just happened? What's going on? That's our perceptual systems, but all the research and cognitive science suggests that that's our, our value systems as well.

Laurie Santos: That's our hedonic systems, the kinds of things we enjoy in the world. When we first get something that's awesome, it feels really awesome, but then we get used to it pretty quickly. We stopped noticing how amazing it is in our lives. To give you an example of this, I'm going to do one that's close to home. I use lots of yell examples with my students, so I can't help but use that here. I'm going to give you an example of a hedonic moment that is really, really fantastic for my Yale students. It's the day that they find out they got into Yale, right? So stimulate this, right? You're a high school student, you've been working for years and years. Yale is your dream school. You're like, go. You get the little email that's like, here's the information, and you click on the information and

you're waiting to see it, and then you get this little video that says, congratulations. You're in Yale. It plays the yell bulldog songs. So those bulldog pull that blah blah. And you're like, right. That's a great moment. So to see how great it is, I'm just going to, cause it's like a very emotional moment and you guys are not enjoying your life. So I want to give you some emotional contagion of some happy people. So here are some reactions. If you go on Youtube, you can find these wonderful like colleagues, acceptance, reaction videos, and here are just a few publicly available ones from you.

Laurie Santos: You have to wait to find out. You're clicking on this website.

Laurie Santos: There was a problem again. [inaudible]

Laurie Santos: [inaudible]

Laurie Santos: Oh my God. I'm like [inaudible]

Laurie Santos: [inaudible] gonna kill me. This is the little sister videotaping it. What's that?

Laurie Santos: [inaudible]

Laurie Santos: all right, so you get, you get the picture. Those of you who are parents, hopefully you had moments like that for the school as a year of students went to and so on. And that's the moment, right? You find out and it is like a really, really high heat Arctic moment. People are just getting, yes, yes, yes. Oh my God. Holy Crap. Like this is amazing. Right question is happens the next day. Next day you talk to students while they're still pretty excited to get into you. What about like, you know, first day of their freshman year or like, you know, midterms and their junior year. I've literally never seen anybody in the mid terms of their junior year or wake up and be like, oh my God, I'm, yeah, like what happens? Right? It was that awesome at the beginning. How did the awesomeness go away? And the awesome this went away because of adaptation. You just get used to stuff.

Laurie Santos: It's a general feature of our mind, but it means the good stuff doesn't feel as good as we think over time. One of the researchers who's looked at this in detail, one of the world experts on hedonic adaptation is Dan Gilbert, who's a professor at Harvard. He is a fantastic book on this called stumbling on happiness, which I recommend you all check out. Um, but here's his quote on this subject. He's, he's wonderful for having fantastic quotes. You'll hear him a bunch, but he knows wonderful things are especially wonderful the first time they happen. But their wonderfulness. Wayne's with repetition and the book Dan brings up the first time your partner said, I love you. Which kind of feels amazing. But like yesterday when they said I love you, like not so good or an even better example, a better example for parents in the room.

Laurie Santos: The first time your child said Mommy or Daddy. But like last Thursday when they said, mommy, your daddy not so good and why is that? You get used to it. It's a problem, but it's a problem that explains why so many of you are in this room. He had on it, got up. Tieszen is the glitch of our mind that explains why we don't always continue enjoying those good things in life. Why their wonderfulness? Wayne's with repetition. What do I mean? Well, let's take the things that are good in the room here, right? Many of you are here in Aspen in part because you're materially affluent, you can kind of pay to come here or play to fly here to come to this wonderful place. You know, why isn't that making you as happy as you think? Will you just get used to money? What are the things you get used to?

Laurie Santos: Well, as you get to a certain salary level that just becomes rope becomes boring to you. You need more to kind of feel it. Um, just some evidence of this. Uh, researchers go out and they asked folks, how much salary do you think you need? Right? What number could I put on your annual salary check? You just wouldn't need any more over time. And if you go out and you ask folks that are earning 30 k, they say, well, that's not enough for me. I really need 50 k to feel happy. So in theory, we should go out and find the folks who were earning 50 k and they should be like, I'm good. This is awesome. I don't need anymore. Right? Researchers do one better. They find the folks earning a hundred k these folks don't even say they're good, even though they're earning double.

Laurie Santos: What other people dream of? They say they need 250 k to feel happy, right? So we're constantly kind of running after the money. We never get there. Here's just another data set that shows this. This is by Di Tella and colleagues who had this wonderful huge Dataset, 7,000 Germans across the 80s to the two thousands and they looked at how people salary increased over time because folks were getting more materially affluent and in particularly individual folks whose salaries are often going up over time. Question is what happens to their happiness and now I'll just show you a quick graph that's plotting salary in these Germans over time which went up because folks are getting richer. What happens to happiness? That's this line. It's just flatlined. Nothing changes over time. We get used to a lots of money. We get used to the stuff that money buys. We get used to awesome stuff.

Laurie Santos: You know when you first move into the amazing house, you think this house is going to feel amazing every single day, six months in, you're just kind of bored with it. We think if we buy a really nice car it will feel fantastic. You might look at the Audi is there out there that you test drive and you test drive or you think this is going to feel amazing every single day it's going to feel just awesome, but probably don't tell the Audi people. This would probably, if you had the Audi, it would just stop feeling amazing over time. Why you would get used to it or perhaps more eloquently. I'll go back to Dan Gilbert who notes many of us believe that this new car is better because it lasts longer. You know? That's why you want to buy an Audi, but that's the worst thing about the new car.

Laurie Santos: It's going to stick around. It's going to stick around long enough to disappoint you over time. And so this is kind of a problem. It means we get disappointed with the stuff we have. We don't enjoy it anymore. And then what's our instinct? Our instinct is like, I should get more stuff right? I should buy a new car and a new house and a new DVD player and all these things and then that you get adapted to and then you have to buy more stuff and more stuff. I think he'd want to get attention is one of the reasons that in the u s right now, things like the storage industry is a multibillion dollar industry because people buy more stuff thinking they need it and you end up on this vicious cycle. So we get used to all the awesome stuff in our life because if you don't wanna get up, Jason, and we get used to all the awesome people in our life because if he onic adaptation, he don't want to get up. [inaudible]

Laurie Santos: is one of the reasons that even if you have a great marriage, it doesn't feel as good year 14 as it might the day that you got married. We just get kind of used to it and researchers have data on this too. It looks kind of like the data you've seen before. This is one study by Lucas at all that plots people is life satisfaction and marital satisfaction across the years of their marriage. So that zero point is when you get married and here is what they find, which is that, you know, right when you get married, you get this kind of bump up in your satisfaction. But basically, even if your marriage is amazing, you just go back to baseline. And that might cause some of you to think this is horrible. None of us should get married, we should all get divorced. But the joke is that even divorce has he done and adaptation,

Laurie Santos: it just goes, just goes in the reverse direction. So

Laurie Santos: all this goes to say, we just get used to stuff. That's just how our minds work and it kind of sucks, right? And so it raises the question, okay, how can we stop this? Let's get rid of hedonic adaptation. Don't part of our mind. Get rid of it. Sadly, again, not the way mine's work, right? But we can do some stuff to thought heat on it. Got a tissue. If you know that that's happening, if you know that you're so used to the water in the back of the room that you don't get incredibly happy when you see it because you're not like someone in Shanai who doesn't have it. Like you can start doing things to appreciate things like the water and your salary and all this stuff a little bit more. You just have to put in some work and that work comes from of following.

Laurie Santos: A couple tips that I'll give you since I work with college students, they like these kinds of hashtags and things. So we come up with this Hashtag like psych pro tip is, I'll give you some psych pro tips about this. Here's your first one just to, he'd he donek adaptation and that's it. You should spend your money in your time investing in things that are harder and harder to adapt to things like experiences. Some of you may have heard, this is the kind of thing, you know, invest in experiences, but it works because if he Dominic adaptation, you know when you buy the new Audi, it's just going to be your Audi two years from now, right? You're going to get bored with it because it's this material thing that's

gonna last. But if you spend your money on things that aren't necessarily going to last for very long, you know, you go on vacation, that's going to be a week, right?

Laurie Santos: You take a go to a concert, it's going to be a couple of hours. You go to the museum, you kind of enjoy it for a little bit, have a really nice glass of wine that you savor. It will be over relatively soon. Those things don't last long enough for you to adapt to them. And that means that investing in experiences gives you a bigger bump than investing in material things. And because I love Dan Gilbert, I'll give him the line on this. He, you know, goes on to say, you know, you talked about this new car, this new car is going to stick around to disappoint you, but a trip to Europe is wonderful. It evaporates. It has the good sense to go away and you're left with nothing but a wonderful memory. We think this thing sticking around is a good idea, but it's not. Um, and that means that even on your vacations, even on your experiences, you don't want to experiences that are going to stick around forever.

Laurie Santos: You kind of want the experiences to go and be done with them, right? And so that's like tip fit. Tip Number one, we should be investing in experiences, not in stuff. Our next tip is something similar, which is the one we're enjoying. The good things we should take time to savor them, to notice them, to pay attention to them and so on. We often think about savoring when we enjoy experiences like eating something delicious where you're like, oh, I'm going to pay attention to this. I'm going to be in the moment. Some of us forget to even do that. You will eat the delicious ice cream, I'll check in your email and so on. But with fluids and experiences we tend to savor it. We don't do that as much with the other material things in our lives, but what would it look like if we did you know what it would look like if you really explicitly took time to like savor your great marriage that you haven't noticed for awhile or just savor that beautiful house that you have and so on.

Laurie Santos: Like this is a simple tip where you can kind of shut off hedonic adaptation because you start noticing it again. You notice it just like you would if you test drive the Audi where you're like, oh, we'd be curious about this new thing and so on. You start noticing new stuff and that can help you thought he'd on adaptation because you start noticing the stuff that really was great about things and so that's the power of savoring. You just need to take time to savor the stuff that really matters. The third one is kind of a mechanism of Saverin, but it's a particularly special and powerful one, which is not just savoring the experiences when you're, when you have them, but taking time to really appreciate them, to show true gratitude for the good things in your life. There's lots of research suggesting that happy people tend to be grateful.

Laurie Santos: People that when happy people are asking, how are things going in life? They say, my life is amazing. I see nothing but blessings. Now you might say that's just because those people are happy, like happy people. You know what I like? Is it the case that gratitude causes happiness or is it the case that happy people tend

to be really grateful and research has looked at this, research has just asked, what if you just force yourself to notice blessings? What if you pay attention to those more than the hassles and the research suggests that that's the kind of thing that can bump up your happiness. This is advice that I still need to hear is even the professor that teaches this class on happiness because my natural instinct is not towards gratitude. My natural instinct honestly, is kind of towards the hassles in life. When I meet a friend for a glass of wine, she asked, how's it going?

Laurie Santos: I don't honestly list any of the blessings. My tendency is to list all the hassles. I don't list any of the coworkers who I love. I just list that one coworker who really gets on their nerves, but I can learn from the research on gratitude, right? All you need to do is to just flip the switch a little bit. You just need to pay attention to the blessings in your life and one of the easy techniques for doing that is to simply take time to explicitly notice what you're grateful for, to scribble down the things that you happen to be really thankful for and your life that you might not have really noticed. This is what researchers refer to as having a gratitude list or even it was a gratitude app. And so on. And researchers talk about this because it's powerful. Research suggests that the simple act of scribbling down three to five things you're grateful for at night can make you happier within about two weeks.

Laurie Santos: And now just cause you've seen some of these examples, you can scribble down things that might not normally be on your gratitude list. Like today when I woke up and I turned the shower on, I had water that was clean that I could use to bathe myself and have something to drink. And there's dry climate. Like today when I walked out of here, they were like, not just food but like lots of different options for food. Like before today you probably didn't notice that and think, oh my God, my life is amazing. I'm so thankful that I had that. But this simple act of pausing to pay attention not only makes you notice, it makes you just feel grateful and happier. But it also lets you realize that, hey, you don't have to get adapted to this stuff just cause you're used to it. You can pay attention and be grateful in a different way.

Laurie Santos: And gratitude is maximally powerful when we're not just paying attention to the material things in our life, but when we take time to be grateful for the people in our life who often go unnoticed, right? We're often really grateful for our family members or coworkers or so on, but we don't often tell them what would happen if we did. We often think this is kind of awkward and might feel a little weird and so on, but the research suggests it's much more powerful for our wellbeing than we think in part because it reduces hedonic adaptation and just to see one study on just how powerful this is, work by the positive psychologist Marty Seligman. He had folks stank, the people they cared about in a very particular way. They did what he called the gratitude visit. And so here's the prompt that subjects get in the next week.

Laurie Santos: I want you to write a letter of gratitude to someone who's helped you or has been especially kind to you, but you've never properly thanked them. Then deliver that letter in person to the person in question. And in the best case scenario, you read it to them so they don't say anything yet. I just want to get through this and read it to you. People predict this is going to feel a little awkward when I should. When I presented this to my class at Yale, somebody screamed out Emo, which is like college students speak for like a little bit too emotional. What they have wonderful little euphemisms for this stuff to too emotional, like a little little too much, you know? Um, what really happens when people do this is that it's, it's not true. The people who received these letters often or point that it's one of the best moments of their lives.

Laurie Santos: Like not just a 10 out of 10 on a happiness scale, but just like really an incredible moment. So make, you're really doing something nice for someone else. But what's most amazing is what happens to you. Like the act of doing this has to break up your hedonic adaptation. You're thinking about what it would have been like not to have this person and so you had this big boost in your wellbeing from doing this simple act. Here's just the graph. The white bar is when you do this gratitude visit, the black bars, when you just kind of list your memories as a control beforehand and no difference in the two groups of subjects, but right after the test you get a big bump up in happiness for the folks who do the gratitude visit, but more you get a bump up and happiness that lasts and their data.

Laurie Santos: This is an effect that lasts for between one to three months, which is crazy. Like if I told you at the start of the talk that I'm going to give you something you can do and like half hour tonight, you know, maybe another 10 minutes when you meet with the person that would bump up your happiness while past Labor Day, you would think that that was crazy. But that's the power of gratitude and that's the power of breaking up your own hedonic adaptation. And so that's kind of tip number one or a few tips for dealing with problem number one of why our mind suck, which is that we get used to stuff and we don't realize it. Now we'll switch gears to the second way our mind suck. Uh, one day that you might have noticed, and it's a little bit related to heat onic adaptation because it's another deep feature of our mind that we can't really control.

Laurie Santos: It's the fact that our minds seem to care a lot more about context than they do about absolutes. What do I mean there? What I mean is just that our mind could pay attention to all the absolutes in life are absolute salary level, are absolute, you know, happiness and gratitude with our kids and so on. But it doesn't really do that. It takes a shortcut. It evaluates everything in life relative to some reference points, often one that's completely arbitrary just to do the perceptual version of this. They think it's easier when you see this in terms of visual illusions and so on. Here's a famous illusion known as the Ebbinghaus illusion, which shows this power of evaluating relative to reference points. So how many of you, when you're looking at that orange circle, I think the bigger one, the one that looks bigger is on the right show of hands.

Laurie Santos: Yeah, you guys have seemingly normal visual systems. That's what most people think, but it's an illusion. It's not true. When I take away the context and those reference points, you can see that the circles are exactly the same. Even when I just told you that and put you back, you can't help but notice them as different when they're there. You can't help but notice things relative to some particular contexts. That's our visual systems, but what the research suggests is that we do the exact same thing. He dauntingly in terms of when we're evaluating our happiness and the kinds of things that give us value, even for some of the most extreme hedonic events in life. If you have some relative reference point out there that's doing a little bit better than you, it can feel really bad. I'll give you one example. This one comes not from you, but from actually a famous study.

Laurie Santos: We're going to cut back to the Olympics. Back when Michael Phelps, the swimmer one, one of his many goals of many gold medals, he's pretty happy. Obviously winning a gold medal, that's absolutely the best. Let's look at the other absolutes on the stage with him. Absolutely. Second best. So not as good as Michael Phelps, but this person should be pretty happy. This is Laszlo see the Hungarian swimmer and you can see from his face, here's surprisingly Laszlo is not feeling super happy, like he's actually looking kind of like shock, maybe a little pissed off like he's not really happy, right? So that's absolute position number two. Now let's look at the bronze medal winner. This is absolute position number three. So this guy should be feeling like way, way on how, I mean have Laszlo is looking like this. What's this guy looking like? Well, it turns out he's not looking upset.

Laurie Santos: He's actually looking incredibly happy. Maybe even happier than Michael Phelps, but he's like worse off. Absolutely. What's going on? What's going on is the power of reference points. What are the different reference points if you're these individuals on the stage, you know if you're gold, you're good, right? Cause you won gold, but what of your silver? What's the salient reference point? While I was, I was probably thinking if he was just like off by like 0.2 seconds, he'd be up there with the gold. Like his reference point is not any of the other swimmers that he be because he beat every single one except one person. His reference point is gold and he didn't get it and if he, if he feels awful about it, he feels angry and sad and disappointed. He's not up there thinking I'm second absolute best in the world. He's thinking this is awful.

Laurie Santos: This is a tragedy. But what about the bronze medal? Like if that's the case, why is he so happy? What's his reference point? He was not going to, the Ryan Lacosse was not going to be Michael Phelps like he was off by a lot, but his subluxate reference point isn't the silver or the gold. It's like, oh my gosh, I almost didn't even get up here. Like I almost didn't medal at all. Like my parents are in the audience and they almost like saw get fourth and I was like, Huh, yeah, so he's like incredibly happy. It turns out right, so you might think that this is just a one off, but this is actually something that psychologists have studied at the Olympics. They go out and they film the Olympics. One famous study was

done at the Barcelona [inaudible] 92 Olympics and they filmed people on the stand and they try to look at who's happier and what they find.

Laurie Santos: If you compare things like smiling, different happiness ratings in these winners, is it bronze medal winners are super happy, whereas silver medal winners are really upset. In fact, if you look at the dynamics of silver medal winners, facial expressions, it's not just that they're less happy. They're actually showing the expressions of things like contempt, disgust, and even anger, right? So that's being second best in the world. Absolutely. But having a bad salient reference point, and it's powerful because this too is showing us why we're so unhappy all the time because you can be absolutely in the best position possible, but if you turn out to be second best, that's going to not feel good anymore. It means we're not evaluating all the things in our life relative to our absolute position. We're doing it relative to some reference points and the sad thing about our mind is we tend to pick kind of the worst ones for ourselves.

Laurie Santos: How does this play out? Well, let's look at reference points in the context of money. You already saw one case of reference points in the context of money. What's our reference point for money? It's often what we used to earn, you know like what we are in last year. That's what we get used to. This is why you saw the data I showed you before, which is that \$50,000 seems amazing. That seems like the maximal amount of money you would need for happiness if you're earning 30 k but if you're earning \$100,000 it doesn't feel that good actually. Even if you're earning \$50,000 it doesn't feel that good. Right. Our old salaries, our reference point and that means every time we get a raise we get used to the new thing because if you don't have got updation and then that reference point becomes boring over time.

Laurie Santos: That's a salient reference point, but a worst one is John Stuart mill was quick to point out. The political philosopher is other people. He noted that men desire not to be rich but to be richer than other men and that kind of leads to a problem because every time you see somebody doing better than you means you feel bad about your own salary and it causes us to do some interestingly irrational things. This is one study back in the 90s by soul nick and Hemingway. They went up to Harvard students at the time and ask the following question, which scenario of salaries would you prefer? Do you want option one where your earning \$50,000 but everyone around you and your from everyone in your community, let's say, is there any \$25,000 that's option number one or option number two is you earning \$100,000 but everyone around you, everyone at your job is earning \$250,000 which feels better now by absolute purchasing power, you can get twice as much purchasing power because the world hasn't changed just the other people in your business, right?

Laurie Santos: By absolute purchasing power, option two is twice as good, but in fact, just over 50% of people pick that one. We would rationally give up half of our salary, just irrationally give up half of our salary to be doing better than the other people out there. And so this is kind of what we're seeing. It seems like we're thinking

about our salary relative to others, but you might say, well, maybe there's some context in which that's reasonable. You know, you don't want to be earning slightly less than the person at your job because maybe you're doing the same thing. Maybe that would be kind of unfair. Right? So some reference points might be good. So for example, for me, maybe I would use this individual as a reference point is my wonderful colleague Paul Bloom who is another professor in my department. So like if I found out his salary was like way more than mine, then that might matter.

Laurie Santos: But it would be stupid for me to use people whose jobs are completely different. Like if I looked at Beyonce's salary and found out she earns more than me, like that would be really dumb, right? That's what we think. That's what would happen rationally. But that gets to another way that our minds suck, which is that we don't get to control which reference points come in. Our mind just happens to use whatever reference point seems to be salient at the time. Whatever reference point we happen to notice. And it tends to particularly pay attention to reference points who are doing better than us, which kind of sucks. What's one of the main interesting examples of this? Well, it turns out that we're constantly faced with reference points who look like they're doing better than us who are earning more than us. Your lifestyles of the rich and famous kind of thing.

Laurie Santos: Does that affect us? When you plop on the television and you watch the Kardashians, is that changing your sense of your own values and what you should be earning yourself? The answer seems to be yes. Oh goodness. Scrum did this back in the 90s and they just looked at how often people watched TV with the assumption that usually when you're watching TV you're seeing kind of rich and famous more than than not so rich and famous. And what they find is that as TV watching goes up, there's a correlation with people's estimates of other people's wealth. You think other people are more wealthy, the more you watch TV, but worse, the more you watch TV, the more you think you are poor, you think you are less wealthy, the more rich people you tend to see on TV, which is kind of crazy. This was shown in real life.

Laurie Santos: So that's just like your perceptions of wealth. But what about your actual purchasing? How does that change things? Well, there's a lovely study that looked at this particular on the odd situation in Europe, which is what's known as the Dutch postcode lottery. It's a very smartly setup lottery because it plays on people's reference points. The way the lottery works is you play the lottery, you like put in to get a lottery number, and then the lottery commission picks out a postcode. So they'd like pick out your zip code. And the idea there is that if you're a zip code came up, you would win if you played, but if you didn't play, you don't win anything. Why is this such a good idea? From the perspective of reference points? That means if you don't play the lottery and your postcode wins, everybody else on your block who played one for like a huge amount of money and like somebody's gonna roll into their house.

Laurie Santos: So like a big check and you're just not going to get one right. Which feels kind of bad. The other interesting about the postcode lottery is it's not just about winning money. People also when cars, and that's what Kuhn and colleagues were interested in. Like if you're in a postcode where a bunch of people, one cars but you didn't, does that effect your real car purchasing? We so covetous of other people's material goods that will buy one even if we don't need them. And that's what they actually looked at. They measured how many people buy a new car within the year depending on whether you're just a control, like you didn't win anything. No lottery was one. Whether somebody won the car that was two houses away versus whether somebody won the car, that's literally next door. So you walk home every day and the guy has his new car in the driveway and what he finds is before the lottery, there's no difference in these conditions.

Laurie Santos: But after the lottery, people tend to buy more new cars for if you got the guy who's next door who has the new car, you tend to buy one a little bit more. And it like, it maps onto how far away the houses are, which I just find incredible. You know, the Bible was onto something to warn us about coveting our neighbors stuff and possessions and lovers and all this stuff because this is just a natural feature of our mind. Reference points means we cannot appreciate in absolute terms what we have. We're always looking to something else. And this is one of the reasons my college students love memes as a favorite famous meme. If you're a young person going around, even if you've got something good, you're coveting something else. And so it affects, it affects our friendships. Turns out it affects our sex lives.

Laurie Santos: And that's one thing that uh, Wadsworth and colleagues have looked at. The question is like, what makes you think you have a great sex life? Like, what makes you sexually satisfied? Well, it turns out it's two things. One is how much sex you're actually having more sex means you're happier with your sex life. But there's an equally important thing with what matters for your sex life, which is how much sex your friends are having. And if you're a sex or having, if your friends are having a lot of sex, that means that you're less happy with your sex life, right? These are reference points, even invading the bedroom, but they do worse than that. They even invade our own perceptions of ourselves in terms of our body positive and now it looks positively so even if you're absolutely a very wonderfully looking person, you can sometimes find a reference point that makes you feel bad, and that's funny if you're a Sophia Loren with jeans Damien field, but it's not as funny when you're one of the millions and millions of people who are looking at photo shopped bodies all the time, right?

Laurie Santos: Where you're seeing these social comparisons that are just better than you. They're not even real social comparisons in some sense that they're fake. Research suggests that girls who look at magazines more rate their bodies significantly less attractive than folks who tend not to look at magazines. And you can do this just in simple interventions where you force somebody to read a fashion magazine for an hour or two and then come out and then their body looks less good. Just like watching TV makes you think other people are richer.

Watching TV makes you think other people must be better looking, therefore you don't look as good yourself. And that's was research done in the 90s with magazines. Nowadays we have reference points that are incredible in terms of their looks, their salaries and everything and they're given to us and we like knowingly go through these all the time when our Instagram feeds and so on.

Laurie Santos: Given the power of reference points in the fact that we can't control them, what is that doing to us all the time? What is that doing to our young people all the time? And so that's reference points, but there's an even worse thing about all these social comparisons that you got to hit from, from my Photoshop comment. And that's the fact that we can't control them. They're just going to be happening. We suck in the wrong ones, but what's more awful is that when we pick people, we tend to get the comparisons totally wrong. We tend to assume that other people are rich and happy and having lots of sex when they're not any of those things. We just kind of make it up and this gets back to another wonderful quote by the thing called Charles demands as you. He notes that if we only wanted to be happy, that would be easy, but we want to be happier than other people, which is almost always difficult than we think.

Laurie Santos: They are happier than they really are. This is the thing I see constantly when I'm counseling my Yale students who are always thinking everyone else is less lonely than me. Everyone else is happier than me. Everyone else is getting better grades than me and I know that that's not true because I know that they're comparing themselves to these other students outsidess, but they don't know what's going on on the inside. Like people actively hide when things are bad. On the inside, you know, so they're looking at this thinking, this is all wonderful. This guy's failing econ. She's super homesick. She's totally pretending to have fun. But like that's not what we see. We just see the outsidess and there's lots of research suggesting we're super bad at these comparisons. Here's just one study by Jordan and colleagues. They did something cute with college students where they had freshman college students estimate all the good things that happened to you in the bad things that happened to you, all your positive and negative experiences.

Laurie Santos: But then they also had people do that for their friends to how, how often does this happen in your peer group and so on. And then just asked, do these match up cause they should match up, right? Everybody should be thinking the same things. If everybody's accurate. Question is what's the accuracy of people's social comparisons? And so here's what they find when they look at positive events. Again, they're asking people to estimate. So estimate how many times did your friends attend a fun party? People say, about 62% of my friends attended a fun party. How many went to an athletic game, how many went out with their friends, how many had a great Neal, how many got a great grade and so on. So people are estimating these things really highly. But what happens actually, what happens actually is that for every one of those percentages, pretty much people are off where they think everything is really wonderful and there's lots of these positive events.

Laurie Santos: But in practice there's not as many as we think it's not perfect. Sometimes they get off a little bit, but generally we think people are having more positive stuff than they really are. But the effect is even more striking for the negative things they asked me, they asked students, what's your estimate of how much bad stuff is happening? Everybody else? How many of your friends had a fight with their roommate? How many of your friends thought about missing their friends or was worried, we're worried about their huge workload or it was rejected by somebody they're interested in or thought about their bad habits or even got a low grade and so on. Every single one of these cases, people were off and they're often off by a lot. Why? Because we hide the negative things when they're happening to us. Like college students aren't going around bragging about getting rejected by somebody or they have all these bad habits are missing friends at home, you hide it, you hate it interpersonally and you hide it on your Instagram feeds.

Laurie Santos: And that means the social comparisons we're getting aren't just bad for us, but they're incorrect. We're comparing ourselves against a standard that's not even real and it makes us feel bad about ourselves. And so all that raises the question, what can we do to stop these social comparisons? And luckily we all, we can't stop them as we've learned. We can kind of just the work done, right? But there's some good tips that we can use to thwart them. And that's the last of your site pro tips. And so one of these site pro tips is that if you want to thwart reference points, you got to switch it up a bit. And that's why I think we had this idea that variety is the spice of life. And you know if you go out to the ice cream shop every day and you always get the chocolate over time, that's going to start feeling really boring.

Laurie Santos: You're going to stop. Even if chocolate is your favorite flavor, you're going to stop noticing how awesome it was cause you get bored with it. But if you switch it up a bit, if you try the chocolate and then the cookie dough and then the strawberry and all these things, you consistently get a little bit more of a bump because you're noticing the differences. That means that we have to introduce variety even for the good things to notice the best things in our life, and this can be powerfully compelling because it means that sometimes even if we're at the best, if you need any of the best ice cream, you have to switch it up and kind of downgrade a bit to actually notice that it is the best. As you get used to really fantastic things in your life, you will just be bored with them unless you give them up every once in awhile.

Laurie Santos: In that example I like to use is and planes. Right before I was like a boring academic. I used to sit in the back of the planes, but now sometimes when I fly out to nice places, people will put me in first class. And when you're an academic has always been in coach and you go to first class, you are amazed. You're like opening the little baggies is amazing, right? But if you fly first class all the time, you just get bored with it. In fact, they're kind of mad. Like this first class isn't as good as the other first class I was hitting. You're laughing because you know you're done.

Laurie Santos: But what does that mean? How do you make FirstClass better? It's not what you think. Great. The way you make first class better is to mess up your reference point Phi coach once a year and it will change your reference point, I promise. And so that's pro tip number one. Variety is the spice of life. You got to switch it up and you got to get rid of the good things. But there's second pro tip is a way you can get rid of the good things without actually having to get rid of it. And that gets to this idea of engaging in a process that folks call negative visualization, like just not necessarily going into coach, but really taking time to imagine what it would be like. They're right. This is a famous technique that's talked about a lot and fiction. Those of you who've seen, it's a wonderful life.

Laurie Santos: I've seen this writ large. You're the Jimmy Stewart character. The movie is about him thinking about what if I lost all the wonderful things in his life. It was kind of like a dream and he gets them back at then and he's way happier cause he imagined what it would be like to lose all the good stuff. And it turns out that this is a technique that's relatively ancient. This is the one that stoics, back in the day, folks like Epictetus and Seneca talked about. Seneca talked about the fact that you should start every day with 10 minutes imagining that all the good things in your life are gone. You've lost your salary, you've been exiled from your community. Your kids are like, just like, think about that. And the claim is like you will go to the rest of your day feeling happier. You've kind of thought about this as their term and Latin.

Laurie Santos: It means that premed Tato, Malora may means you're thinking about all the evils. If you've thought about all the evils already knew, really thought carefully about what that would feel like. That's your reference point. So when you don't have that anymore, you see if it feels amazing, right? It feels much better than you think. And so the experiences, I want to try this just for two seconds real quick. How many of you in the audience have kids? Show of hands. All right. I want you to imagine that whenever the last time you saw your kid was, that was the last time you're going to see them, they're gone. All right, I bet the next time you talk to them or see them, you will hug them a lot more deeply, right? And that exercise took like two seconds, right? That is the power of negative visualization.

Laurie Santos: And it turns out that if you act on that and you use it, you can really get some big effects of appreciating the stuff that you've gotten used to as a reference point. And so here's one study by Ku at all. They had folks try to kind of reinvigorate their love for their partners. You do this negative visualization where you write an essay about what would it be like if I'd never met my partner? Like you really think through and write it in detail or you do a control where you just write about how you met your partner and then you look at people's satisfaction with both their happiness levels and their happiness with their marriage. And when you find as you get like differences have twice as much happiness with your marriage just by that simple act of writing essay. And so we often don't think this, but it turns out that if we want to kind of love something, you got to let it go.

Laurie Santos: Even if it's the best thing. Good news is you don't always have to do that. You might be able to do that with first class and moved to coach. Probably don't want to do that with your kids or your spouse, but you can use the power of imagery to feel it. And as you saw, it doesn't take very long and you're so follow the advice of the stoics every morning. What would it feel like not to have these good things in my life, the powerful moment to appreciate them. Then we get to our final psych pro tip, um, which is not engaging in negative digitization. That was the one you just heard. It's taking time to hack your feed. And I think this is particularly important for those of you who spend a lot of time on wine. What you've just seen is that you can't control those reference points even if you think those things aren't getting in.

Laurie Santos: They are without you realizing it, but you have some control over this stuff that you put in your fees and the magazines you read and so on. And there's lots of kind of attempts to deal with this. Dove has their kind of real beauty campaign where they're trying to get more real bodies and media, which in theory will make us not be comparing ourselves against Photoshop models but thinking of ourselves as a real body like most of the other ones out there. But it's even more important I think hack the feed of the things that you're reading about online, you, your to your Instagram feed is full only of the rich and the beautiful and so on that's affecting you in ways that you don't expect, but you can control that. You can change that around your reference points could be Beyonce and her salary and her life or they could be the kinds of things we talked about.

Laurie Santos: Your reference point could be like there are people out there that literally don't have food, right? There are people out there that are literally taken away from their families that don't have freedom, that don't have like wash cloths and toothbrushes and things like that could be your feet and those reference points we'll get in as well. And so that's the last site pro tip, which is that you can't control what the reference points are doing, but you can control which reference points you see and you can hack that a little bit more. Okay. So that was a quick crash course on two ways. Your mind suck and lots of things you can do to do a little bit better. And I wanted to end with a little bit of an advertisement because what I've found from teaching this class is that we often don't realize that it's not the circumstances in our life that are bad.

Laurie Santos: It's the way our mind is reacting to them. Right? Your lives really are awesome. Like you are materially privileged and you have the kinds of political freedoms that most people in the world don't even enjoy. Like it's crazy that we don't appreciate them, but the problem is our minds. It's not just doing that. The good news is that if you understand how minds work, you can control it a little bit. And so to help you with that beyond the class, I'll give you the option of kind of taking the whole thing. Because we've put a version of the class online on coursera.org completely for free, and it turns out it's become pretty popular. Over 300,000 people have taken the class, and it's pretty worldwide. You have folks from all over the world who've taken it, and I think this kind of shows a lot of the things I wanted to convey, which is that your life is completely awesome,

but if you don't understand the glitches of every mind, do, you won't enjoy it. The good news is you can, you just have to put a little bit of work and understanding it. And with that, I'll express my gratitude for coming out to Aspen. Thank you. Awesome. [inaudible].