



How caring for others can make a difference in our own happiness

Laura Lane's interview with Mark Setton, Part 1

Episode #16, Hope, Strength and Courage Podcast – Full Transcript

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Thank you for tuning into the Hope Strength Courage Podcast. Love and support for parents whose kids are fighting for their lives! A weekly podcast created to support parents and caregivers of children diagnosed with cancer, where you will find resources collected to help you face each day with Hope, Strength and Courage. From interviews with the top experts in their fields: doctors, psychologists, chaplains and inspiring frontline workers in paediatric oncology as they share their best advice, as well as day to day advice collected from other cancer moms and leaders in personal growth and development. From individuals who understand how hard it can be, I hope you will feel better prepared to cope with the day-to-day challenges of caring for your child. Hi, I am Laura Lane, and I am your host. My own daughter Celeste was diagnosed with cancer at the age of 12. In 2015 I wrote about our experiences in the book "Two Mothers One Prayer: Facing your child's cancer with Hope Strength and Courage". Since that time, I have dedicated thousands of hours to share with other parents and caregivers the resources, tools, tips, skills and strategies I learned that helped our family to stay happier, healthier and more hopeful. My goal is to share with you my interviews with experts to support you as you care for a child with cancer.

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Today's episode features part 1 of my interview with Dr Mark Setton, PHD in Philosophy D.Phil., co-founder and CEO of Pursuit of Happiness, a non-profit organization dedicated to data driven research into the study of happiness and depression prevention.

This week our discussion revolves around what inspired Mark to co-found the Pursuit of Happiness Organization and the research that they focus on and the implications it has for helping us find happiness in our day to day moments. Mark shares with us the first 2 of 7 Habits of Happy People which we reviewed on his website Pursuit of Happiness.org

I hope you will enjoy this interview as much as I did.

I am pleased to formally introduce you to Dr Mark Setton,

Mark has his PHD in Philosophy and has studied and published works on East Asian philosophy for the past 30 years. He earned his B.A. and M.A. at Sungkyunkwan University, the only Confucian university in Asia. He has taught at the State University of New York at Stonybrook, the University of California at Berkeley, and Oxford University, where he earned his doctorate.



Mark and his team design and teach educational programs on the science and implementation of well-being for secondary schools, universities, and corporations such as Google, Mediamax, the China Accelerator, Dartmouth College, etc. He is especially interested in recent scientific discoveries on well-being, as well as the remarkable resonance between modern science and ancient wisdom.

He is the co-founder of Pursuit-of-Happiness.Org

**Mark Setton:** Well, thanks so much for having me here.

**Laura:** So, what can you tell us about founding the **Pursuit of Happiness** and the mission of your organization?

**Mark Setton:** Well, that would take about a day but I'll try to give you the micro version. I am trained in philosophy, I am a philosopher. My dream was to teach Chinese philosophy in the West. I fell in love with Asian philosophy when I was in high school. I'm very grateful to my teachers because they were so boring that I would read books in the back of the class. And some of them were more interesting than others, but I'm grateful to the boring ones, because that's how I discovered Asian philosophy. And one day, I think I was around 17 years old, I picked up a book by the Chinese philosopher, Zhuangzi and he's a Taoist philosopher, and I remember reading this book, and having this feeling that I couldn't describe. It was something – it was a sense that this person was - the writer of the book was way happier than I was. He had insights that were so deep I couldn't fathom, and that I wanted to go to China tomorrow. Basically, that's what the book did to me. It's one of those books that changes your life. The title of the book is "Zhuangzi". The spelling is really strange, it's translated into English. It's Z-h-u-a-n-g-z-i. As a result, I studied Chinese and Korean philosophy in the Confucian University in Seoul, Korea for actually seven years. I did my doctorate in Oxford. And then one day after 30 years, my dream came true. And I got a call from the State University of New York and Stony Brook. And they said you'd like to come and teach philosophy in America. And that's how I ended up here.

So, the whole story about pursuit of happiness really begins with a letter I received from one of my students, and the funny thing about the letter was, it arrived about two years after I had taught one of my courses on Confucianism and Taoism. And the letter was pretty long and devastatingly honest. To introduce it very simply, the author of the letter said, "you don't know me ... you have a bad memory so you will forget my name, anyway". So, it was an anonymous letter. She said, "I was very short; one of your students in the back row of the class. I'm an African American, and I was going to kill myself. And the reason why I decided not to, was because of what you taught about Confucius. I don't receive a lot of fan mail. And I was astonished. After I read through the letter, I discovered that she had been abused as a child by her father. And she was so full of anger, and she described that she was so full of anger that she was a prisoner of her own mind. And I never forgot that expression - being a prisoner of the mind. And she described how she wasn't really in the classroom. She'd been



kidnapped by the past. Filled as she was by resentments about what, you know, her family had done to her. And one day, she heard a teaching, she heard what I was explaining about one of Confucius' core teachings which is called "*Rectification of the Mind*" and she said, "I had this feeling that my whole problem was about rectification of the mind, or rectification of the heart. And I practiced it, and my life changed. And I suddenly discovered that my life had meaning. And that's why I'm writing this letter." And as I read this letter, I couldn't believe what I was reading because I taught very theoretically. I was trained to teach things on a very theoretical level without linking them to real life. And I think I was pretty dry and uninspiring. And that made the letter even more extraordinary to me. By the time I read the letter, I was in tears. I had this feeling that I think - an unforgettable feeling. I must have taught 10,000 students in my career. But just one life, you know, just changing one life, having an impact on just one student, it made all the difference to me. It made everything worth it. All the struggles suddenly took on a new meaning. And so, what happened is as soon as I read through the letter, I wanted to write back to her. But she left no address on the envelope. There was no name on the letter, it was completely anonymous. And I wanted to tell her, well, Confucius has changed your life, but you've changed my life.

And the way she changed my life is, I think by two things. She completely changed the way I taught. I decided from that time on, I would connect theory and practice.

And the other recognition was, I suddenly realized that ancient philosophy Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism – they're all about happiness. Overcoming suffering and discovering happiness. It might sound stupid to say that because I've been studying for 15 years. And so, what I did was I typed "happiness" on Google. And that was, that was like opening a Pandora's box. But it was a nice Pandora's Box. All these good things out of the box. And one of the things that flew out of the box on Google was I discovered a website about the famous positive psychologist Martin Seligman. And I read about his psychology. I didn't know much about psychology. And I found this extraordinary resonance between the discoveries of modern psychologists like Seligman, and the greatest insights of Confucius, and Buddha and Solomon and I was so excited. I had no idea that he was the most famous psychologist in America, or, you know, among the top three psychologists in America of last 50 years. So, I wrote him an email, a very informal email, and I said I said Dr. Solomon, I'm astonished by the linkage between, you know, the insights of Confucius and the insights of positive psychology. And he was very excited. He wrote a letter back to me saying, well, let's have a conference about perspectives on happiness, psychological and philosophical perspectives on happiness. And I wrote back to him to saying I'm sorry, I'm too busy to do that because I'm going up for tenure, I want to be a full professor. Of course, I didn't know who he was and if I did, I would have immediately said oh, let's have a conference. But, actually, I'm actually glad I did that. Because instead of having a conference, I get tired about all the blah, blah, blah, you know, and I kind of turned into an activist I think, Asian philosophy couldn't be turned into a therapeutic instrument. And so, I decided that I would write this little website called the "History of Happiness" and I included all the philosophers that spoke about happiness. Like



Aristotle, Zhuangzi, Lao Tzu, Confucius ... and I created this little website and I began to get emails from all over the place, from different parts of the world saying, can I assist you? Can I write something for your blog? It's a very new experience for me. So that's how the whole thing began.

**Laura:** Well, that's terrific. And then who else do you have on your team there at ...?

**Mark Setton:** Well, things kind of took off very rapidly after that. As I mentioned, people would just contact me out of the blue. I had a coach, a life coach called Alison Holzer, she wrote to me, out of the blue again, saying, is there a way that I can work with you for the **Pursuit of Happiness**? And I said, yes. And then she introduced me to a psychologist, Amy Brzezinski from Yale. And Amy said, well, why are you just talking about philosophy? Why not talk about the science of happiness? The psychology of happiness? And then I suddenly went, boom, and I realized, oh, yes, we should have a website that links the two. Because you, know, the psychology ... the science of happiness gives us empirical proof about what makes us happy. We're getting closer and closer to understanding how to become happy through all these exciting new discoveries, and then the philosophy makes it come alive. Especially the Chinese philosophers have all of these stories that illustrate ...

**Laura:** How it all fits together ...

**Mark Setton:** Yeah, so the team, um, that's, I mean we had no money. We were all professionals who work in psychology, philosophy, education. Many of them joined by simply emailing me. I would email people to ask for their assistance. And so, we're basically powered by volunteers. And that's the way we all began. I think, probably, I would say about 100 people have contributed to the website we have now, and I'd love to name all of them, and thank all of them.

**Laura:** Oh, that's great. So, what are some of the recent discoveries in the field of happiness and positive psychology that you would highlight?

**Mark Setton:** Well, that's a great question. That's a field that I'm very interested in, and you've actually reminded me of something quite important because we don't claim that we've discovered exactly what happens is. I don't write books saying, you know, ready this and be happy in 15 minutes. The whole idea behind our website is that we're getting closer and closer to understanding what happiness is. There's many factors that contribute to happiness and if you pick up any books that say read this, and you will find the secret of happiness, I will be very, you know, skeptical. But the exciting thing is the science leading us closer and closer to understanding. And, you know, I mean if you want a percentage, I would say we're like 80% of the way there. But in answer to your question, some of the most exciting discoveries, just to take one example, is the idea of *Locus of control*, that's a technical term. What we're trying to do is make the science available. So, *Locus of control* basically means ... it's all about how much you feel in control of your life. So, if you feel that things are out of your control, that your life is being shaped by circumstances beyond your



control, it will tend to make you more depressed. If you feel that you are more in control, and that you can shape your own life and you're excited about shaping your own life, then you're happier. So, *Locus of Control* has become self determination theory is connected to that. It's become a great focus of interest for scientists interested in psychological well being.

To actually mention one more discovery that I think many of you will be aware of, is animals are being used more and more in therapy. Sometimes they do a better job than psychiatrists. Comfort animals - they've been used for many varieties of sadness or mental illness such as, you know, returning veterans recovering from PTSD who were treated with, you know, who were educated according to the teachings and positive psychology, and it did nothing for them. And maybe one reason is because they were so enveloped in depression and PTSD that they didn't want to talk. They would have this wordless communication with horses and dogs and many of them experienced something, a very dramatic change through building relationships with animals.

**Laura:** I know that when my daughter was in the hospital, Sick Kids Hospital in Toronto, they had a program of bringing in a service animal that would climb - would be able to either reach down and pet them or the dog was allowed on their bed. And they could stroke, cuddle, play with the dog. It was very therapeutic. It's wonderful to see them bring that resource in for the children. Going back to what you were saying about Eastern philosophies and perspectives about happiness. What do you feel are missing? Which of these lessons that you have learned do you feel are missing in Western culture today? What are we missing out on they seem to have grasped that we haven't yet?

**Mark Setton:** Everything (laughing). So, I mean, right now we're going through a depression epidemic. I, you know, I felt very deeply that we were, I just needed to look at the students in my classroom over the years to see that we were going through an epidemic. And, my psychiatrist friend who's Head of Research at the Pursuit of Happiness Project, he didn't believe me. He said, no, no, it's just that we have better ways of measuring depression. And actually, one year later he came back to me and said, well, Mark, you were right. I looked at the statistics, and Yale University has a survey; they've been studying levels of depression over the last hundred years. And curve just goes exponential. It's kind of scary curve. So why is it that we're going through this epidemic? I think we're going through a perfect storm. And especially kids, but also adults. We're doing all the wrong things. So just to give examples, I went through a serious depression from the ages of 20 until the age of pretty well 35, and sometimes beyond 35. And I know now that I was sleeping wrong, I was eating wrong, I was thinking wrong. I think now the causes of depression are getting even more complex. I think the technological revolution is impacting the way people relate to each other. Young people don't know how to communicate face to face anymore. Though I think there are a lot of reasons.



**Laura:** There are a false sense of connections through social media that we're not actually connecting. We think we are. We think if we do more of it, we'll connect more but it actually creates less connection.

**Mark Setton:** Absolutely. It's almost as if you're looking at – you know, when you're talking about face-to-face communication, you're talking about many different levels simultaneously, of communication taking place simultaneously. Like you know, body language. I wave my hands around a lot 'cause I'm half French, you know, I'm more expressive perhaps, than, you know, some of my career friends. And so, there's this body language, there's this facial expression, there's smell, which of course we can't get over Skype. We can't get over "Go To Webinar". As you may know, we have pheromones which have an unconscious impact on the way we feel when we react to people. We have a tactile sense. We can hug people. And all these make, you know, as you can imagine, they make a huge difference on the amount of benefit we get through relationships. And they create this chemical called oxytocin which is really important for our well being. So, when you're just texting, you're dealing with a very narrow ... it's like one wavelength not multiple wavelengths of communication. And, I guess, you know, that doesn't generate the love or, chemically speaking, you know, I think there's much more to love than oxytocin. It doesn't generate oxytocin that boosts our well being.

**Laura:** Can you share with us the seven habits of happy people, then?

**Mark Setton:** Yes, yeah, I love to. I should say that while I'm, while we're getting the seven habits on screen, I should say the whole purpose of the **Pursuit of Happiness** project is to take the science and make it more available. So, we're trying to simplify, you know, thousands and thousands of scientific studies, including positive psychology. But also, there's a lot of new information coming through neuroscience, social science, all the different sciences and providing us with some very interesting insights.

We talk about the seven habits, there could be eight habits. In fact, I'm having a big discussion now about including self determination theory, this thing about *Locus of Control* as a new habit. So, you know, do we make it number eight? Number seven is kind of sexy, that's why we want to keep it to seven. So, we have seven habits here.

And the first one ... basically the science seems to be telling us that relationships are extremely, extremely important. I don't think I'm qualified to say well, this habit is number one, and this habit is number two. You know, happiness is, is a balance between many different factors. It's kind of like physical well being, right. We need sunlight. We need exercise. We need to eat right. There's a lot of different things, and if they're not in balance, even if one thing is off, then physically they can have a pretty dramatic impact. I actually frankly, I'm very skeptical about the idea of, well, there's one thing that can make you happy, you know. So, the science seems to be showing that there's a lot of different factors, but one of the most important is relationships. And especially the importance of expressing your



heart, talking about your dreams, talking about your struggles, seems to be really really important. And building a sense of well being. And the more we avoid that - we might avoid that through a sense of anxiety; we don't give away our secrets when we've been hurt. Someone has used our secrets in the past but the more we avoid that, the more chance we have of slipping into depression.

**Laura:** So, vulnerability is ... we have to allow ourselves to be vulnerable.

**Mark Setton:** I think vulnerability may feel uncomfortable, but it's actually very good medicine.

**Laura:** That's one of the things in my book, *Two Mothers One Prayer*. I'm a big fan of the things that I've learned from Brene Brown which talks about vulnerability, and the courage that it takes to allow ourselves to open up, that we need to reach out and connect with others. That's a huge part of coping when things are difficult.

**Mark Setton:** Absolutely.

**Laura:** So, we've covered the seven habits theme relationship ...

**Mark Setton:** And the next one is about caring. Or you might say acts of kindness. Someone pointed out to me that caring is kind of instinctive. So probably, it would be more accurate to say acts of kindness. And that seems to be, you know, if anyone asked me what is the secret to happiness? More than anything else, I would probably say it's connected with relationships, I would probably say, caring, or kindness. And there's been many experiments on the impact that acts of kindness can perform, not only on the people who receive acts of kindness, but on the giver.

And it's a famous experiment. It was published in the New York Times where they gave a group of people, I think it was \$5 or \$10. And one group was told to spend this on yourselves, and the other group was told spend it on others. And by the end of the day, of course, the ones who were spending on others received, you know, a huge lift in the sense of well being. But that's simple example. Many many studies have been carried out. It can be just very simple acts of kindness to the people around us. Or it can be more systematic, compassion, you know, through volunteering through working for a nonprofit, something like that. My wife complains to me that I'm so involved in, you know, trying to get this information out to thousands of people out there, that sometimes I forget about, you know, caring for my relatives around me. They're both very, very important and they both make happy future impact.

**Laura:** It sounds like caring, and acts of kindness is what leads to stronger relationships. So, the people that we spend that attention on, if we're serving them, then that's who we're building the relationship with. And if we don't spend the time on caring and doing things for those closest to us, then those relationships will weaken.



**Mark Setton:** I completely agree with you. And I actually come from a very sort of individualistic background. And just to be very transparent, you know, I, I don't think enough ... there are some people that are natural givers. Right? They naturally think about the people around them. I'm a philosopher. I tend to get absorbed in my own world. And I forget, but I think you're absolutely right and I think one of the key things is just listening. Even listening is an act of compassion. Very, very, you know, simple. It can make a very big difference.

**Laura:** Well, that leads to empathy, right? Once we start to see other people for who they are, once we listen to their hearts, and we connect with them, then that strengthens that relationship, it helps us to just create a stronger bond.

**Mark Setton:** Yes. In Buddhism, knowledge and compassion, wisdom and compassion are very closely related, and I always used to wonder why. Why is, you know, knowledge related to compassion? And I think it's very closely related to what you're saying – that the more you know about someone, the more you know about their background and personality, the more you understand, and the more compassionate you'd feel. So even someone who behaves in a very nasty way towards you, if you know why, you know, maybe it's something that's happened in their life it much more easier to love them.

**Laura:** One of the things that I ... when I discovered what the word charity means. The word charity comes from the Greek word *agape* and it means to see someone as God sees them. That if we could view everyone around us the way that God and the universe sees them, down to their core, to who they are, and treat them tenderly ... that when love becomes an expression of tenderness, and we recognize that all of us are fragile, and we can treat each other with that concept of that fragility. We don't want to break them that, we want to treat them as tenderly as we can. Then that is the ultimate sense of charity.

**Mark Setton:** Well, I've just learned some Greek, thank you.

**Laura:** You're welcome.

What fascinated me most about my interview with Mark was learning the importance of relationships and how acts of kindness can make such a difference in not only someone's else life but in our own well being and mental health. These are two tools that bless both parties. These are two ideas I cover in *Two Mothers One Prayer* as well: the importance of reaching out and connecting and then finding ways to express love to those around you. I would say two universal truths. I would love to hear your thoughts on these ideas and what Dr Setton has shared so far. Visit my blog at [LauraLane.ca](http://LauraLane.ca) and share your thoughts in the comment section.

To learn more about Mark and The Pursuit of Happiness Organization please visit his website at <https://www.pursuit-of-happiness.org>





Before we end our show today, we have one last segment. Over the last few years, I have asked other cancer moms what advice they wish they had known when their child was first diagnosed. I have compiled that information and will be sharing their advice each week. You can download the top 101 pieces of advice that I put together as a mini E-book at [www.twomothersoneprayer.com](http://www.twomothersoneprayer.com)

Today's advice comes from Heather.

Never, ever, ever give up hope. Once you give up hope, there's nothing left. So, grab on tight to it now and do not let go ... no matter what doctors, nurses, friends, family etc., tell you ... never, ever, ever give up hope.

Beautiful said! Thanks, Heather for sharing that.

If you have advice you have learned along the way that you wish someone had told you weeks, months or years earlier, I invite you to fill out the contact form on our website [www.twomothersoneprayer.com](http://www.twomothersoneprayer.com) and I will be sharing your advice with our listeners on future shows.

***[Music begins lightly in the back ground]***

Thank you for taking time out of your busy schedule today to listen to the Hope, Strength & Courage podcast. I look forward to sharing more experts and advice with you again next Wednesday. Please remember to take a minute to subscribe to the show. Thanks also need to go out to our Hope, Strength & Courage production team which consists of my wonderful assistant Tracey Ogilvie-McDonald, Andrew Braun at Braun Audio and Audio Geek, music by Fiz Anthony, social media support by Marife Constantino, and graphic design by Amy Hosmer. To learn more about myself, Laura Lane, and to order my book, please visit [ww.lauralane.ca](http://ww.lauralane.ca).