

'After Class'

The Pursuit of Happiness

A Holistic View of Happiness with Karla Murdock

Season 1, Episode 5

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Ruth Candler: Welcome to W&L After Class, the lifelong learning podcast. I'm your host, Ruth Candler. In every episode we'll have engaging conversations with W&L's expert faculty, bringing you again to the Colonnade even if you're hundreds of miles away. Just like the conversations that happen every day after class here at W&L. You'll hear from your favorite faculty on fascinating topics and meet professors who can introduce you to new worlds and continue your journey of lifelong learning. Thanks for listening.

In today's episode, we'll be talking with Karla Murdock, professor of cognitive and behavioral science. Carla joined the W&L community in 2005. As a professor in the cognitive and behavioral science department, she teaches courses related to her field of clinical psychology, such as Introduction to Clinical Psychology, Developmental Psychopathology, Applications of Cognitive and Behavioral Science, a community-based learning capstone course and The Pursuit of Happiness. Her research program examines associations between technology use and indicators of health, well-being, and cognitive performance. In recent years, she has been a duPont Faculty Fellow in the Office of Community-Based Learning, a core faculty member in the Shepherd Program and a coordinator of the Questioning lecture series. Thank you for joining us today, Karla.

Karla Murdock: Thanks for having me.

Ruth Candler: It feels great to be doing this interview in person.

Karla Murdock: I agree. We haven't had enough of that lately.

Ruth Candler: No, we haven't. For all our listeners out there: Don't worry. We are an appropriate distance away. And I'm thrilled to be in Karla's office talking with her today about such a timely and very important topic: happiness. Today at long last we will be engaged in the pursuit of happiness.

So, Karla, with everything we're dealing with right now, the pandemic, racial injustice, global warming and our environment, having a conversation about happiness is so welcome. I have always felt that we create our own happiness. Is that true?

Karla Murdock: I think it can be true. Happiness can take lots of different forms, many of which we can have some control over. So we can make choices about how we spend our time, or even to some degree

how we craft our lives, so that we can connect with the best in ourselves and in other people. We can invest in relationships, which are probably the most fundamental aspect of happiness for most people. And we can try to understand our own strengths, so that we can apply them to things that matter to us. So there's lots of things we can do to access, and also to some degree create, happiness.

Ruth Candler: So within that concept that you can create your own happiness, is it the question of what steps should you take to become a happier person?

Karla Murdock: That's an interesting question. And I talk about that with students a lot in my course, like: "To what degree do we have responsibility for creating our own happiness?" In the class that I teach, we talk about sort of philosophical issues around happiness like that. But we focus to a large degree on empirical views of happiness.

The class focuses on the field of positive psychology, which is a relatively new interdisciplinary field—it's about 25 years old—that examines personal traits and behaviors and strengths and structures that allow individuals and communities to thrive. So by knowing about the science of happiness, students are in a good position to try to create happiness. Whether or not they feel like they're responsible for that is another issue altogether.

Ruth Candler: So in this course that you teach on happiness, I read through your syllabus and some of your course readings. And there's a lot of terminology in there that we should make sure that we all understand. I'd like to take a couple minutes just to define a few of those terms.

What is the difference between hedonic happiness and eudaimonic happiness?

Karla Murdock: That is a great question. So hedonic happiness relates to or focuses on finding pleasures—on experiencing pleasures. And so when we think about hedonic happiness, it's feeling good in the moment. You can probably think of lots of things that give you pleasure. So eating ice cream, buying something new, hearing a funny joke. But the tricky thing about hedonic forms of happiness is that we adapt to them very easily. So the first bite of ice cream is just heavenly. But by the 20th bite, we've typically adapted to its deliciousness. It's not quite as delicious as the first bite. So the deliciousness of the ice cream can kind of, like, fall off our radar, the longer we are exposed to it. When we buy something new, it seems really awesome at first, and then before long, the pleasure of it has just sort of faded into the background of our life. So hedonic happiness is sort of momentary experiences of pleasure.

Eudaimonic happiness focuses instead on kind of the bigger picture of your life. So eudaimonic happiness focuses on a sense of meaning and purpose in life. It's about feeling fully engaged in life, and really about mobilizing the best of yourself in service to something bigger than yourself. So you might think about eudaimonic happiness as involving a longer-term sense of life satisfaction and well-being.

Ruth Candler: What do you mean by affect?

Karla Murdock: We spend a lot of time in the Pursuit of Happiness class talking about affect. And affect is a word that loosely translates onto emotion. So an affect is really your momentary emotional state, how you're feeling right now. And the psychological research has kind of chopped affect into two categories: positive affect and negative affect. And most of the research in the past has looked at negative affect. So negative affect, or feelings that we don't like, like anger, sadness, fear, frustration, there's been a lot of research trying to understand what makes us feel that way and what other kinds of experiences that's correlated with in our bodies and in our behavior.

But the field of positive psychology is focused more on positive affect. So these are emotional states that feel good. So feeling cheerful or content, feeling a sense of interest or excitement or love or even awe. Affect is a really useful word because although we often use the term happiness as kind of a shorthand for feeling good, people actually experience happiness through all kinds of different positive emotions and different kinds of positive affect.

Ruth Candler: My next question was “Describe the difference between positive and negative affect,” but I think you just did that. Or is there a little more detail that you can give?

Karla Murdock: Yeah, I mean, all I can say is positive and negative affect are sort of built into us at a biological level. So positive and negative affect are part of our temperament. They're really... There's evidence that our characteristic levels of positive and negative affect—so the degree to which we're going to kind of lean more easily into experiencing positive emotions versus leaning more easily into experiencing negative emotions—that's, like, built into our bodies when we are born. And they're separate things. So just because you have a propensity to experience a lot of positive affect doesn't mean that you also don't experience negative affect. They're really sort of two separate continua.

Ruth Candler: So it's almost like how you look at things, is your glass half full or half empty?

Karla Murdock: It is. It's kind of... It's sort of built into us a little.

Ruth Candler: We can safely say that not all kinds of happiness are created equal. How can one achieve optimal, long-lasting happiness?

Karla Murdock: Well, I think long-lasting happiness is almost by definition eudaimonic in nature. In other words, it's... Since the experience of hedonic happiness tends to be so fleeting, we adapt to it so quickly, it's less likely to produce sustained happiness. And in fact, trying to be happy by consistently pursuing pleasures is called the hedonic treadmill. You seek a pleasure, you get it, you adapt to it, and then you start the cycle over and over and over again, perpetually. Long-lasting happiness is more likely to come from building strong relationships, which, of course, can take some work, and they don't always feel pleasurable in each moment.

Another helpful thing for long-lasting happiness is to understand your strengths. So to understand the ways that you interact with the world that come easy to you, that feel important to you, and that you're really naturally good at. We tend to be happiest when we're being the best versions of ourselves. And knowing our strengths allows us to find ways to deploy those strengths in our relationships and in our work and in our free time.

Students in my class take a questionnaire called the Values in Action strengths inventory. It's a free questionnaire online, it generates a free score profile, and it really provides a head start for thinking about this process of trying to really understand what your strengths are, and how you might use them to build a life that feels best to you.

Ruth Candler: I just made myself a note to put that questionnaire link on our website for our listeners so that they can take that at the end of this. You know, we've talked about emotional states. What is meant by well-being?

Karla Murdock: Well-being is sort of an indicator of eudaimonic well-being, or eudaimonic happiness. When we think about someone having a sense of meaning and sense of purpose in their life, often we would measure that through their level of life satisfaction, or their level of what's called subjective well-being. That's just, how good do you feel about your life? Do you feel like you've done most of the things you hoped to do? Do you think, you know, on balance, things are going pretty well? So well-being is just sort of a global term for the cognitive and the affective sense that you make of your life, your evaluation of your life, both cognitively and emotionally.

Ruth Candler: I was looking over your course reading on Barbara Fredrickson's broaden-and-build theory. If I understand it correctly, it posits that positive emotions prime the mind to look at the world broadly, while negative emotions tend to make us focus on a narrow, predetermined range of solutions to a problem. Can you give us an example of this phenomenon?

Karla Murdock: Yes. I love this theory, because I think it just makes a lot of sense in terms of how our emotions translate into our experiences. The broaden-and-build theory draws from research that, as you said, shows that when we're experiencing positive affect, our thoughts and our actions broaden. So when we're in a good mood, we think more creatively and more integratively, and we solve problems better. When we're in a good mood, we're more likely to go out into the world and do things and try new things.

When our thoughts and behaviors are broadened like this, it allows us to build knowledge and social connections and physical strength and all kinds of other resources that help us to thrive and also to cope with adversity. When I talk about this with students, I ask them to contrast their thoughts and feelings when they're in a bad mood versus a good mood. When we're in a bad mood, we often withdraw, we take a nap, we pout, we maybe yell at other people, we feel like quitting. But it's often when we're in a good mood that we feel like connecting with other people. We feel like trying something new and getting outside of our comfort zone.

So essentially positive affect is good for us. It starts a cycle that is likely to produce future experiences of positive affect, in addition to just building resources that are really useful to us.

Ruth Candler: Do you have any advice for our listeners who might be feeling some negative emotions and need to feel more positive?

Karla Murdock: Yeah, I think most of us are experiencing more emotional distress than usual right now.

Ruth Candler: True.

Karla Murdock: My advice would be to look for small ways that you can cultivate positive emotions. And this can be as easy—I mean, it's a different recipe for each person, but, like, watch a funny movie, or read a funny book. Maybe reach out to someone who loves you or who makes you laugh. Maybe try dipping your toe back into some kind of activity that brings you pleasure or brought you pleasure years ago, but you haven't done in a while. And really set an intention to try to protect time to do that thing.

You know, I alluded to relationships earlier. I think that relationships are really central to our well-being. And so looking for opportunities to have caring and positive interactions with other people, even if they're interactions that only last for a few seconds, or even if they're interactions with people you don't know and may never see again, those kinds of interactions are likely to give you a little jolt of happiness that feels really good. And then, again, like, broaden-and-build model, when you experience that little jolt of love or happiness, it often leads to other experiences like that in the future.

Barbara Fredrickson has done some really interesting research on these kinds of interactions, and she finds that when we have these brief, kind of smiling, caring interactions with people throughout our day, they give us this little jolt of love that registers in our body, like you can measure in your body the positive effect, and it can actually help to undo some of the physiological stress that is associated with negative emotions. So, another good reason to kind of cultivate positive emotions for yourself is that it can undo the negative effects of, you know, feeling angry or sad or a little depressed on your body and sort of changes your physiology in a positive way.

All of those suggestions are ways to maybe reduce your negative emotions and build some more positive emotion. I should also say that it... this sounds like a broken record, but doing some kind of physical activity every day is...

Ruth Candler: Get those endorphins going?

Karla Murdock: Yeah. There's no, there's... We don't need any more research to show the benefits of daily movement. And, especially in terms of delaying cognitive effects of aging, it's good for your brain. So moving around—whatever it is—walking, you know, stretching, doing a little bit of yoga or chair yoga, these are good things for our emotions.

Ruth Candler: Karla, you just talked about happiness and health and how they're linked. Could you go into a little more detail about that?

Karla Murdock: There's a big body of research now showing that people who tend to experience positive affect more often have better health outcomes. And this has been shown across just about any kind of health indicator you can imagine, including longevity, which blows my mind. So people who are happier are more resistant to the common cold or other common viruses, they recover more readily from surgeries, they respond better to medical treatments and they live longer. I won't have time to go into the methodology of this sort of longevity research, but it's really compelling. And it makes a really good case for building more positive affect into your lives. It's not a sort of selfish move to try to do that. It really gets manifested in ways that affect not only your health, but then, of course, like, other people that you love.

Ruth Candler: I know that your Pursuit of Happiness class addresses cognitive processes that relate to happiness and well-being. What are some of the aspects of thought or belief that resonate most with students?

Karla Murdock: Students are often really interested to learn about issues related to choice and control. So, for instance, behavioral economists have studied people's decision-making tendencies. And they've discovered that some people work very hard to maximize or optimize most of their choices, while other people generally just search until they find an option that's good enough, make their decision and move on. Behavioral economists call this first group maximizers, and maximizers try to collect every bit of relevant information so they can choose the very, very best option.

You can imagine this involves investing a lot of time and energy into decisions, even if those decisions aren't particularly important in their lives, like whether to buy new blue underwear from Target versus new green underwear from Amazon. So this is not an important decision, but it's easy for maximizers to get caught up in it and, unfortunately, maximizers are more prone to second-guessing or regretting their decisions. And ultimately, they're less happy with the decisions they've made, regardless of the quality of the outcome. So they just never feel sure that they got it right. And since they've invested so much time in the decision, they really feel responsible for having not got it right. So it's kind of a trap.

The second group that behavioral economists call satisficers, they don't usually spend a lot of time on their decisions. And they don't usually regret them. In fact, they don't think about them very much at all, which in the end tends to make them happier. So students—and I would argue, actually, especially Washington and Lee students—often recognize the maximizing tendency in themselves, and they find that it doesn't really serve them and they find that they can choose to approach some decisions with less of a maximizing tendency, and it does them right.

Ruth Candler: So how is control something positive in our lives, and when do you think it can have negative side effects?

Karla Murdock: Human beings tend to be really big fans of control. And we like to believe that we are in control, or we should be in control, over lots of things that are actually not at all within our control. So, for instance, I think that W&L students often feel they should have an airtight plan for their future and do every single thing possible to ensure that plan comes to fruition. They feel really responsible for making that plan happen. And in some cases, they really run themselves ragged trying to prepare for it and make it come true. In fact, they think that they are responsible for working hard and playing hard, in addition to building a resume that will get them a prestigious job, finding a passion and following that passion, and also achieving happiness. So to some extent, I think the iGeneration views happiness as an outcome that they are responsible for. That's a really tall order.

Ruth Candler: Sounds very stressful.

Karla Murdock: It is very stressful. And we see evidence that that's really stressful in this generation. So most of us adults can look back on our lives and see that we couldn't plan and didn't have control over much of what has happened to us, including, you know, some of the most sublime aspects of our lives.

But students don't often see it that way. And so they kind of overattribute how much control they do have or should have. And that can be problematic. While often it feels good to be in control, it's also important to realize the limits of our control and the downsides of feeling that we should try to control everything in our lives.

Ruth Candler: You hear the term mindfulness a lot these days. What does it mean to be mindful? And what part does it play in happiness?

Karla Murdock: Lots of people have heard mindfulness tossed around in the media, and definitions are sometimes a little bit abstract or hard to understand. But I think about mindfulness as a state of paying full attention to the present moment and accepting that without any kind of judgment.

It might be easier to think about what mindfulness isn't, because the opposite of mindfulness is kind of our default state of mind. Our minds stay really busy with abstract thoughts that are made possible by our very big brains. We think about things in the future. And in the past. We worry about what-ifs and we replay scenes of 'Why did that happen?' So at any given moment, our brains tend to be multitasking and making lists and planning ahead, and much of this mind-wandering really isn't productive at all. And some of it is very unproductive because it distracts us from things that would actually make us feel good.

Our swirling thoughts can affect how we experience the world in some negative ways. Lots of times we respond to other people based on what we think they believe, or what we assume is their ideology or their background or any other kind of story that our brains are constructing in this, like, ongoing, busy, ticker tape of thinking. So these kinds of thoughts, which aren't necessarily even grounded in reality, can just drag our emotions into some uncomfortable and negative places, purely on the basis of what our

minds are constructing, instead of what is actually sitting there in front of us. Mindfulness is a state of really just paying attention to what is in front of us and not letting our minds, like, drag us into all of these other territories. So mindfulness helps us to be, like, fully present with other people, instead of being distracted, or it helps us to notice something beautiful, or inspiring, or amazing that we might otherwise have missed because we were so caught up in all of those thoughts.

Ruth Candler: We know you teach undergrads, but you have also taught in our alumni college, where your students in most cases are much older than you—older adults who have already experienced a lifetime of joys and sorrows. Do you think mindfulness can be taught at any age? And if so, what are the prerequisites for learning mindfulness?

Karla Murdock: Of course. I think mindfulness is available to everybody. Really, the only thing that you need is a genuine interest in sort of training your brain to experience life a little bit differently.

Ruth Candler: In your Pursuit of Happiness course, you require students to do a daily meditation practice. I think that's so cool. For most of us, though, meditation is hard. It's just... It's difficult to turn off your brain and tune out the world. How do you introduce the idea of meditation to your students?

Karla Murdock: I introduce it to them as, again, sort of a skill for training your brain to work a little bit differently. And there's good research evidence that meditation does lead to or capitalizes upon neuroplasticity. You really are training your brain to respond to the world a little bit differently.

Most students who haven't tried meditation before believe that the goal of meditation is to take all the thoughts out of your head, so that you have no thoughts in your head. And that seems impossible because it is impossible. Our brains are built to produce thoughts, and, like I said earlier, our brains are very busy and all of our roiling thoughts can kind of drag our emotions all over the place and can make us even behave in ways that undermine our own happiness. So the goal of meditation is to learn to notice our thoughts, and to approach those thoughts with a sense of curiosity, and then to refocus our thoughts as we choose.

There's a metaphor I really like of our thoughts just being kind of a rushing river. And when we meditate, we're able to crawl out of the river and sit on the bank and observe our thoughts, and then choose how we want to think about something or how we want to behave. So when we're on the bank of that river, noticing our thoughts, we realize how busy our minds are and how really unproductive many of those thoughts are. So when you practice meditation, you get better and better at doing that.

Ruth Candler: Wow. How do you know if you've had a successful meditation practice?

Karla Murdock: I'm not sure there is such a thing as a successful meditation practice. I think that a meditation practice is just something that's always in progress. So there isn't really a point where you feel like, "Okay, I'm done. That was, you know, I've got it."

Really, the point of meditation practice is to reach a point where you are able to kind of flex your meditation muscle when you really need it in the real world. So when you're sitting at a green light behind a car that isn't moving, even as I describe that, you can probably feel your body getting a little activated, but you can step out of that rushing river of thought, observe your emotional reaction. Like, you know, actually, this isn't a huge problem, even though my brain and body are really acting like it is a huge problem. And then you can decide what to do next with a little bit calmer mind.

So being able to kind of deploy that skill over and over again within a day or a week or a month can really cumulatively add up to a calmer and kind of more peaceful mind. And it feels good. So it's self-reinforcing.

Ruth Candler: I know the self-help genre has been around for a long time, but lately, it seems like there's been a resurgence, with everything from new apps to Marie Kondo and how to declutter your life. Do you think people are more receptive to learning about how to help themselves achieve happiness now?

Karla Murdock: You know, in spite of all of the losses and the stressors of the pandemic, I hope that one of its kind of natural consequences is that some people have had more space in their lives to actually notice and pursue the things that make them authentically happy. So, you know, whether you call that self-help or whether you call it just, you know, a recognition of the value of crafting a life that has enough space that you can feel good and feel settled, I think—I hope—that people are in a motivated place to do that.

Ruth Candler: That would definitely be a silver lining of the pandemic, wouldn't it?

Karla Murdock: It would. I hope we'll remember that.

Ruth Candler: When my husband and I were married eons ago, his uncle, who was also the minister who married us, gave us our premarriage counseling talk while looking out over the water at Pawleys Island. I remember him saying that the three things we'll argue about the most when we were married will also be that which will make us the most happy. And they were kids, money... I can't remember the third. But one of your course readings is called "If Money Doesn't Make You Happy, Then You Probably Aren't Spending It Right." So did my husband's uncle have a valid point way back when?

Karla Murdock: He might have. The research is clear that, on the whole, money cannot buy happiness. So on that point... I don't think your uncle was making that point. But once someone's basic needs are met, additional wealth is not strongly correlated with greater happiness. And there's many reasons for that.

But having said that, researchers have found that we can choose to spend the money we have in ways that are more and less likely to make us feel happy or fulfilled. So, for instance, it's better to... it's a better investment to buy experiences instead of things. We've talked about how we tend to adapt to

things. You buy a new thing, it feels great for a minute, and then you forget about it entirely, or it just kind of fades from your attention. But we are less prone to adapt to experiences. Experiences are often shared with other people. And experiences are often things that we really personally identify with. Hobbies or trips or things that feel really meaningful to us. And then also experiences build memories that we can revisit and get, like, another little charge of happiness when we remember them.

So investing in experiences is a good choice. Also, in terms of buying things, buying lots of small pleasures can produce more happiness than buying really big things. So, again, we're less likely to adapt to small pleasures if they are kind of interspersed through our day. And that's especially true if they involve things like surprise, or novelty, or uncertainty. These are things that capture our attention. And things that capture our attention are less likely to be adapted to. They maintain our attention, and they make us feel good when they're positive things. And another thing that the research has shown that is really important is almost without fail, spending money on other people reliably produces more happiness than spending it on ourselves.

Ruth Candler: Really?

Karla Murdock: Yes, very reliably.

Ruth Candler: Does the field of positive psychology provide any clues about what helps marriages and other relationships stay happy?

Karla Murdock: Yes, here and there. Relationships are complex, and, you know, the deepest relationships aren't happy all the time. That's simply not how human interactions work. But relationships are really central to happiness for most people.

One of the findings that's really stuck with me over the years was from research conducted by John Gottman. And John Gottman is a clinical psychologist who focuses on marital relationships, and beginning in the 1970s, his lab conducted these longitudinal studies in which married couples were asked to try to solve a marital conflict. And they were videotaped for this 15-minute period where they were trying to solve a conflict, and based on the partners' behaviors in these interactions, John Gottman and his lab could predict with 90% accuracy which couples would stay married and which couples would get a divorce.

Ruth Candler: 90% accuracy?

Karla Murdock: 90% accuracy. So there are these, like, signal behaviors that sort of suggested doom for some couples.

Ruth Candler: Wow, you would think that everybody would need to go through that prior to walking down the aisle, wouldn't you?

Karla Murdock: I know. You certainly would recommend an intervention. But what Gottman's lab found is that there's actually a magic ratio of positive and negative interactions during conflict that is associated with, like, stable and happy marital relationships. So for every single negative interaction or feeling that members of a marriage experience when they're in conflict, stable and happy couples have five or more positive feelings or interactions. There's this ratio of five positive to one negative. Five positive interactions are necessary to kind of counterbalance the weight of one negative interaction.

I find this research really compelling because it highlights the importance of, like, cultivating positive interactions within a relationship, things like showing genuine interest in one another, validating one another's experiences and feelings, expressing appreciation or respect for the other person, laughing together. Every marriage has conflict and some negativity, and I think this research provides kind of a useful roadmap for counterbalancing this negativity and building in positive behaviors that kind of bring out the best in both partners.

This is what I love about clinical psychology research. It gives you actual stuff that you can do in your life.

Ruth Candler: Does your husband feel like a guinea pig at times?

Karla Murdock: Oh, you'd have to ask him.

Ruth Candler: We hear so much these days about technology and its effect on productivity, anxiety, sleep patterns, brain function and more. You've researched smartphones and the effect on one's mental health. How did you first become interested in that subject?

Karla Murdock: That's a great question. As I was establishing my research program at Washington and Lee, I taught a research methods course. And I helped the students in this course to learn about focus-group methodology by bringing together guidance counselors in Rockbridge County to talk about the issues that they were facing in their schools, and the guidance counselors said, repetitively, that the number one issue that concerned them was their students' use of cell phones. And this was in probably around 2010.

Ruth Candler: So that was still... Was that still flip phone era?

Karla Murdock: It would have been sort of transitioning into smartphone, but mostly flip phone. But the guidance counselors were just alarmed at what this phenomenon meant for their students. And I thought, if you can trust anyone, it is a middle school guidance counselor. And so that sort of planted the idea of examining this as a potential developmental stressor for children and adolescents.

Ruth Candler: I was struck by a graph in one of your presentations that showed an alarming increase in the frequency of severe anxiety, suicidal ideation and severe depression—doubling since the use of smartphones has become prevalent on college campuses. Will you share some of that data with us?

Karla Murdock: Sure. So there have been several large-scale sort of telephone surveys of representative national samples that have shown this increase in psychological distress. And often that's measured as anxiety, depression, even suicidal ideation. That has happened since about 2012.

Beginning in 2012, more than 50% of the population owned a smartphone, and that saturation has increased to almost 100% at this point. Although these data from, you know, representative samples in the U.S. have shown that after smartphone saturation occurred, we began to see this increase in psychological distress, this isn't a causative relationship. But it is a remarkable coincidence.

And again, as you said, it's really a doubling. So one study shows a doubling of rates of severe depression in undergrads between 2012 and 2018. Symptoms of severe depression were endorsed by about 9% of undergrads in 2012 and by 21% in 2018. During that same period, having a plan for attempting suicide jumped from 2.6% of undergrads to 6.6% of students.

Ruth Candler: Frightening.

Karla Murdock: It is frightening. There's been research that has linked aspects of cell phone use with this increase as well. So, for instance, adolescents' social media use is linked with psychological distress. And just the number of hours per day that people spend on a cell phone is linked with a variety of other issues, like sleep deprivation and other forms of psychological distress.

Ruth Candler: If smartphones are supposed to make our lives better, how or why is this happening?

Karla Murdock: Well, I think there are a number of pathways through which smartphones might be... might cause problems. And I say that while also acknowledging that smartphones do make our lives a lot easier in many ways. So it's... Just demonizing smartphones is really not helpful.

But my own research has investigated the effects of cell phone use on sleep, and there's pretty good evidence, especially in adolescents and young adults, that cell phone use, especially before bedtime, is associated with compromises in most aspects of sleep. So that includes, like, what time they go to bed, how long it takes to fall asleep, the number of times they wake up in the middle of the night. And also just their own subjective assessments of sleep quality, how well they feel like they slept.

Using a cell phone before bed might just be really absorbing so that people keep using their cell phones and don't fall asleep as early as they need to. Or they have trouble falling asleep because they're so just cognitively and emotionally activated by whatever they've been looking at or whoever they've been corresponding with. Sleep is, I think, really central to why smartphone use can be problematic, because once our sleep gets disrupted, psychological distress is just almost certain to follow, as well as other kinds of compromised functioning.

Ruth Candler: Some of those same graphs seem to suggest the optimal amount of time for screen use is an hour a day. Do you feel like that's accurate?

Karla Murdock: I think that the key is moderation. You're right. The literature really shows that one to two hours seems to be a tipping point. The word to describe that kind of relationship is curvilinear. It's not a linear relationship, where just more smartphone use is worse. It's that the optimal level of cell phone use in terms of happiness and in terms of the absence of psychological distress is like one to two hours a day.

And that makes intuitive sense to me. Because, again, there are some good things that come out of smartphone use. We're connecting with people that we care about. We are maybe getting information. We're using it for instrumental purposes that serve us well. But once we get past a couple of hours, then it becomes something kind of entirely different, and we might be losing time on it. We might be experiencing things that aren't really serving us.

Ruth Candler: You recently gave an amazing presentation for our Mudd Center for Ethics on this very topic. In that presentation, you provided a long series of selfies. As I scrolled through, it reminded me of a piece of advice from 1997's "The Sunscreen Song," and the lyrics read, "Do not read beauty magazines, they will only make you feel ugly." Do smartphones and social media put that hazard in our pockets 24/7?

Karla Murdock: I think they do. And again, I think the issue is of moderation. If we are checking into social media periodically and, you know, quickly catching up on what's going on with people that are important to us, it's one thing. But if you think about how adolescents and young adults use social media, it's often, you know, scrolling, scrolling, scrolling, and just seeing the versions of their peers that are carefully edited to, you know, show maximal beauty and happiness. And I do think that's toxic, especially during these kind of tender ages of development that identity is developing, and I don't think anything good comes of that.

Ruth Candler: So are there any apps that we should avoid in particular, or limit adolescent use of social media? Or is it mostly a frame of mind or hazardous cognitive behavior that we adopt, regardless of the app?

Karla Murdock: You know, I don't think that there's a magic answer about apps that we should never use, although I'm sure they're out there. But I think it is a frame of mind, and I do think that for children and adolescents in particular, just limiting access is probably the best thing, considering...

Ruth Candler: Not before bedtime and...

Karla Murdock: Exactly, yeah, so just limiting the minutes and hours that they can just be immersed in the social media world is probably productive.

Ruth Candler: I'd like to change direction a little bit and talk about just how you teach psychology, and specifically the psychology of happiness. We've discussed your course The Pursuit of Happiness, and I

think if you asked anyone if they'd want to be happier, I don't think you'd find anyone that would ever answer no to that question. What inspired you to create a course on happiness?

Karla Murdock: Well, when Washington and Lee switched to the four-week Spring Term, faculty were invited to design a course of their choice, which was an incredible privilege. I never would have imagined I'd have that opportunity. As a clinical psychologist, I really wanted to build a course that would show students the range of research methods that have been used to examine mental health issues. And I also wanted to fill their toolbox with sort of whole-person skills that would be useful to them in their lives.

So when I taught the course for the first time, I built in these experiential elements that I hoped would give them some practice in using the results of the research that we were reading. So I built in a meditation workshop, a yoga workshop and a service learning project. These are all things that are empirically validated as sort of promising pathways to happiness. And the first time I taught the course, I also had the pleasure of linking it with similarly themed courses that were taught by two of my favorite people at Washington and Lee, Jeff Koskey, in the Department of Religion, and Jon Eastwood in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology. And, interestingly, we so thoroughly enjoyed teaching together that we decided to coordinate a yearlong lecture and discussion series about happiness. And that's what launched the Questioning lecture series. So that was a really nice outgrowth of being at a small liberal arts college.

Ruth Candler: Absolutely. I've heard you say before that your students write to learn. Could you explain what you mean by this? And is it a teaching strategy?

Karla Murdock: Yes. So writing to learn means that I have students not only produce formal essays and other, you know, formal research papers, but I ask them to just write a lot informally. So they create... In most of my courses, actually, students create a writing portfolio across the semester in which they are responding to experiences, responding to readings, and just sort of developing their written voice.

What I like about it... There's a couple things. One is that it, I think, allows them to develop a sense of ease with writing that feels good to them and helps them to just sort of wander into ideas that they wouldn't have if they weren't tasked with writing about the material. So I think it's really productive for them. And I also think that for some students, it allows them to be better learners. There are lots of students who don't really enjoy tests or don't test very well. And they find their voice through these sort of smaller, informal writing activities.

Ruth Candler: Your happiness course also has a lot of mini-experiments like doing a secret good deed or writing a letter of gratitude, which students are required to complete and then write about. Can you go into a little more detail of how students react to the assignments?

Karla Murdock: Yeah. I think students who take the Pursuit of Happiness class almost without fail come to the class with an open-mindedness and a sense of fun and adventure that I just thoroughly enjoy. So

they tend to respond to those mini-experiments with enthusiasm and with, you know, really an authentic sense of motivation to try this out and see how it works for them. And with those mini-experiments, you know, some of them don't work that great for any particular individual person. And so that's good information. And some of the other mini-experiments are more effective for them, and they learn something about themselves and, you know, can follow up with the things that work well. So I love that sense of experimentation, and luckily, students who are drawn to this course are generally game.

Ruth Candler: So it's about finding out what makes them tick, so to speak.

Karla Murdock: Right, just sort of what works for them.

Ruth Candler: Do you have a favorite story from those assignments?

Karla Murdock: You know, I don't have a favorite single story, but I will say that they tend to be really just deeply personal experiences, and I—at the risk of sounding maudlin—I just feel really honored to witness them. I mean, students... Again, they're game. They're coming in with a sense of curiosity and openness to really learn about themselves and, through those experiments, sometimes they get to feel a depth of gratitude or a depth of connection that feels new to them. And it's really humbling to get to witness that.

Ruth Candler: Sounds very rewarding as well.

Karla Murdock: I always wish that their parents could read everything that they've written. I think some students share them, but... Obviously, that's not something that is available to me, but I think their parents would be really proud.

Ruth Candler: Do you suggest that?

Karla Murdock: I do. Yeah.

Ruth Candler: Yeah. As a parent, I would want to read it.

I know this spring semester was a little unorthodox, to say the least. With students working virtually, you had the opportunity to get creative with ways for them to explore and find happiness. Will you talk a little bit about your Blog of Delights and how that worked?

Karla Murdock: Sure. So we were all-virtual in the spring, and so I for the first time set up a blog and it... I'm happy that that is now integrated into my teaching repertoire.

The students read Ross Gaye's new book called "The Book of Delights," which contains a series of essayettes that he created across a year, in which he just reflected upon little experiences that brought him delight. He reflected upon these along with sort of other, bigger issues that kind of set the context

for the delight and weren't always, you know, bliss or happiness, but really set him up to be able to experience these little delights.

And so, in my blog, I asked students several times a week to just notice when they experienced some little thing that delighted them, and they posted it either in photographic form or in text form, and they could read and respond to and see their peers' delights, and it was pretty great. I participated fully, and I think, honestly, it was one of the most active ingredients of my spring. It just was really fun to stop and notice and share some tiny cool thing that happened for a minute in my life. And it was wonderful to see what they came up with, because the range and the individuality of their posts was striking.

Ruth Candler: Is that blog available to the public?

Karla Murdock: I think I can make part of that blog available, and I would be happy to do that.

Ruth Candler: All right, that would be great. And for our listeners, we will post that on our episode notes if we are able to gain access.

So you've worked at W&L since 2005. How do you think a liberal arts environment has enhanced your teaching and your students?

Karla Murdock: So before coming to Washington and Lee, I taught at the University of Massachusetts in Boston, and I came up through large state institutions. So this kind of small liberal arts environment was new to me, and I've loved it. It has enhanced my teaching because I have freedom to do things that are creative, and that feel inspired and that are outside the classroom in addition to being inside the classroom.

One of the things I've loved about teaching in an undergraduate-only institution is that those four years are just magical. Getting to see students come in as these, you know, sort of nervous, not very well-formed high school seniors, essentially, and watching them turn into who they are going to be and then step out into the world as people ready to make a difference is just an incredibly inspirational experience. Also having the freedom to be creative in helping them find their paths and try out new things is my favorite thing about being in this environment.

Ruth Candler: You're an advocate of community-based learning. How has this influenced your teaching and research?

Karla Murdock: I like to think that my classroom teaching leads to good things for students, but I see regular evidence in every community-based learning or CBL course that students' work in the community is truly transformational for them. They find themselves in their work in the community. They are led to question their assumptions in a way that I can't as effectively make happen in the classroom. And so I have tried to increase my involvement in community-based learning, and the relatively new Office of Community-Based Learning now makes it very easy for me to do that. It's...

Tammi Hellwig and Alessandra Dickovick and Emily Cole in that office have put together an infrastructure that makes it—easy is a strong word—but greatly facilitates faculty teaching these kinds of courses, and they're really meaningful for students.

Ruth Candler: Seems like you really understand how to use every one of the teaching resources at your fingertips, from CARPE and community-based learning to the labs in the Science Center. If you had a genie who could grant you and your cognitive behavioral science colleagues a wish or two, what new and exciting technologies would you try to bring to the Science Center, and why?

Karla Murdock: I think what folks in the CBSC department wish for more than anything is learning spaces that are really flexible, that can accommodate the kind of integration of research mentorship and teaching that we do here. And so I'm really excited about the renovation and addition to the Science Center in a few years, because I think the vision of those kinds of spaces will really facilitate the research that we do and the way that we can kind of mentor students in research along with the teaching that we do. So I think spaces is actually the technology that is most meaningful to us at this point. It's not some fancy microscope, although those are nice too. But it's spaces that can enhance the range of strategies that we can use to teach.

Ruth Candler: That's interesting, not the answer that I was expecting. That's fascinating.

So now that we've talked about your scholarship and teaching at W&L, I'd like to take it to a more personal level. And we tend to call this our W&L After Class lightning round. So when I say something, just the first thing that comes to your mind. What are your quick tips for maintaining mindfulness when you're feeling stressed?

Karla Murdock: I would recommend, and I do, like a quick five-minute guided meditation. I find that it really helps me to calm my body, which then calms my mind. It's very easy to find a five-minute guided meditation online, on your phone or on your computer, and it just puts my head in a different space.

Ruth Candler: How have you guided your children over the years when they are feeling stressed?

Karla Murdock: I think like most parents that has differed based on which kid and what developmental period. But I've tried to help them identify what aspects of the situation they might be able to solve, and what aspects they just kind of need to let go of and accept, and then, you know, use the best parts of themselves to try to move on, move past it.

Ruth Candler: That's great advice. I wish I'd known that 25 years ago.

Karla Murdock: I'm sure you did that in your parenting all the time and just didn't describe it that way.

Ruth Candler: What is your favorite thing to do in Lexington or Rockbridge County when you're not working?

Karla Murdock: Taking a walk on the Chessie Trail, with a good conversation partner. Nothing beats that.

Ruth Candler: Oh, beautiful spot. I agree. I agree. What is the best place to unwind in Lexington?

Karla Murdock: I love to take a walk through the labyrinth behind Grace Episcopal Church. Do you know of it?

Ruth Candler: I know of it, but I've never done that.

Karla Murdock: You should do it today.

Ruth Candler: I might just do. I might take a detour on the walk back to my office.

Karla Murdock: It's really an inspired place. It's all enclosed by foliage. And so you can go back and just walk the labyrinth. And it's just a beautifully settling sort of moment of solitude in the middle of the Washington and Lee campus, so I can...

Ruth Candler: Right at our fingertips.

Karla Murdock: Right. It's great way to unwind.

Ruth Candler: What's your favorite restaurant in the area and your go-to order?

Karla Murdock: So my favorite restaurant is Heliotrope. And my favorite...

Ruth Candler: That's a new one.

Karla Murdock: It is. It's a happenin' place in Lexington.

Ruth Candler: Yes, it is.

Karla Murdock: My favorite order is currently the cauliflower pizza, because my son is a cook at Heliotrope and he invented that pizza.

Ruth Candler: Ohh, it has meaning.

Karla Murdock: That's right. And it's also delicious, importantly.

Ruth Candler: I was about to say it sounds delicious. Cauliflower crust or cauliflower topping?

Karla Murdock: Cauliflower topping. Along with all kinds of other yummy flavors.

Ruth Candler: All right, I now have where I'm going after this and what I'm having for lunch. That's super. What is your favorite smartphone app?

Karla Murdock: Spotify.

Ruth Candler: Oh, yep.

Karla Murdock: Keeps me going.

Ruth Candler: Out of all the things that we've talked about today, what is your number one suggestion for pursuing happiness?

Karla Murdock: I think it would be to nurture and invest in relationships. So with your family and your friends, but also with strangers. And now is an especially important time to take that to heart, I think. So just sharing a momentary positive interaction, a little burst of caring or a little burst of love, is good for our mind and our body, and it's also good for society.

Ruth Candler: I agree.

Karla Murdock: When we behave humanely by making these little points of connection, we are our best selves. And that makes us happy.

Ruth Candler: You've given us so much to think about today. Really appreciate it. Thank you for joining us. And I know that I'll be referring back to a lot of this information often. So thank you for joining us today.

Karla Murdock: Thanks. That was fun.

[music]

Ruth Candler: And thanks as always to you for listening. To find resources discussed in today's episode and learn more about the pursuit of happiness and other ways to continue your journey of lifelong learning, please visit our website wlu.edu/lifelong. We hope you'll join us back here soon, and thanks again. Until then, let's remain together not unmindful of the future.