**Loretta Breuning (EP 6)**

[00:00:00] **Me:** Hello and welcome to The Happiness Question! Today I have with me Loretta Breuning. a professor and founder of the Inner Mammal Institute from California.

[00:00:09] There's just one question that I need to know the answer to: The Happiness Question!

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[00:00:33] Hello and welcome to The Happiness Question.

[00:00:35] How are you doing today?

[00:00:38] Great! Hi!

[00:00:40] **Loretta Breuning:** Great

[00:00:42] **Me:** hahahaha perfect. Do you mind telling me a little about yourself?

[00:00:45] **Loretta Breuning:** Sure. Well, I was a college professor for 25 years, and I took early retirement so that I could write books. And I had these books in my mind for years. And things I wanted to say [00:01:00] and I had failed for years and years and getting anything published. And finally, self-publishing was invented. And so. I started self publishing books and the first one didn't sell, so I wrote another and that didn't sell.

[00:01:14] So I wrote another and then I promised myself that I wouldn't write anymore until I spent a year on marketing. And finally, I slowly, over time I got an agent, I got a publisher, I got another publisher, and I started getting a lot of readers and now I spend all my time replying to fan mail. Or like a lot of my time, you know?

[00:01:39] So it's amazing.

[00:01:41] **Me:** So how do you have time for all of this?

[00:01:45] **Loretta Breuning:** Well, this is part of marketing. So that's the marketing part. So I put marketing opportunities, especially, when I get to do something verbal, because. Not everybody wants to read. [00:02:00] So I looked for ways to, do nonverbal non written things and, anytime I have left, I'm always working on the next book.

[00:02:09] **Me:** Cool! Writing a book must be a really long process. At least the point where you've gotten it and had the publisher... 'cause I know that it's not necessarily difficult to self-publish...

[00:02:20] **Loretta Breuning:** What's the question? I'm sorry.

[00:02:21] **Me:** I don't know. How do---

[00:02:23] **Loretta Breuning:** ---How do I know when I'm done? Is that what you said?

[00:02:27] **Me:** Processes that like that. It seems like it's kind of like starting your own business. It's just a lot of stress and working with yourself. But what was your mental stuff like?

[00:02:40] **Loretta Breuning:** So everything is hard, and if you focus on the positive, then you can feel happy that you have a chance to do this. And I only focus on my next step. So instead of thinking about "pie in the sky in the future", I think what are the [00:03:00] steps I want to take? And I'm so lucky that I get to do these things, and what is the step that I'm going to focus on today and what am I going to focus on tomorrow morning?

[00:03:12] And that's it, and not overwhelm myself. And then just know that if I have all these other things I want to do that, when I get down to that, I always have in my mind that the hardest thing I have to do, I should do first thing in the morning and only one hard thing each morning and then the next morning I'll get on another hard thing and keep taking small steps.

[00:03:36] And of course I work all day, but I mean to do that like the hard part first.

[00:03:41] That's good!

[00:03:43] But only one hard thing each morning.

[00:03:46] **Me:** Ooh, what kind of things would that be?

[00:03:49] **Loretta Breuning:** Well. sometimes it's when I have to write something that's hard to say because I'm worried that it's going to get criticized. [00:04:00] And so I want to say it very carefully. So sometimes that's to a person, and sometimes it's in a book, like a section of a book. And sometimes it's because I want to say it in a way that's simple, but I have so many ideas, so I have to be so careful to not make it boring.

[00:04:19] If you just say everything and like, how can I make it simple? And then sometimes, you know, technical stuff, when you've tried and tried and tried to do something technical and you failed. And it's at night, and you just get all upset and it's like, okay, I gotta stop. Because once you let yourself get really upset, it's chemicals that make a circuit in your brain.

[00:04:41] And then just thinking about that thing upsets you. So I say, okay, I gotta stop here. I'm going to start in the morning when I'm calm and tackle it first thing in the morning. And like the simplest example, I had to pay someone in Europe for doing something and I could not [00:05:00] get, you know, my bank to communicate with their bank and like, everything went wrong.

[00:05:05] Like when everything goes wrong is sorta, at some point you got to stop and start over when you're calm.

[00:05:12] Haha that is some really good advice actually Okay. Just a little bit more about yourself: What's the Inner Mammal Institute?

[00:05:22] So this is what I started when I was writing my second book, and, I realized that I needed an umbrella for my concepts. So the idea is that our emotions are caused by brain chemicals that we've inherited from earlier mammals, and they're controlled by the part of our brain.

[00:05:45] You know, you have that crinkly part that you see in pictures, but then underneath that it's like this. And then underneath that we have this core. And it has things that you've heard of, like the amygdala and the hippocampus and all these little parts are [00:06:00] the same as an animal’s. And those little parts control the emotions that make us feel good and bad.

[00:06:07] So when you talk to yourself, that's all in words and your emotional brain. Does not have the power of language. So your emotional brain and your human brain can't talk to each other and they really don't know what each other is doing. And that's why life is challenging. And that's why it takes so much skill to manage your brain.

[00:06:28] And that's what I want to teach people how to do.

[00:06:31] **Me:** That's really cool!

[00:06:33] **Loretta Breuning:** Thank you.

[00:06:34] **Me:** How does happiness work? That is not a fair question. But hahaha

[00:06:38] **Loretta Breuning:** Well, that is my whole work and that is my home page. So if you go to my home page, you'll see the whole story all in like very short. So we have some brain chemicals that make us feel good, and you may have heard of them like dopamine, serotonin, oxytocin, and endorphin.

[00:06:59] And they are not designed to flow all the time for no reason. They evolve to do a very specific job. And when you know the job they do in animals. It's so easy to see that that's what we're doing all the time. And of course, I'm not saying that we should act like animals, but it's really the opposite is that we will act like animals if we don't work very hard at using but human part of our brain to manage the emotional part of our brain. But I'm not saying that the emotional part of your brain is all bad because people who try to ignore it and only use the human brain, you can't function bait. We have two brains because we need both and you have to teach them to work together.

[00:07:46] **Me** Awesome. So how do we do that? How do we teach our brains to work together?

[00:07:51] **Loretta Breuning:** So I would say the first thing is self-acceptance. the idea that we have impulses [00:08:00] that are hard to make sense of because they get wired from past experience. So the impulses are, how can I get more dopamine? How can I get more serotonin? So I'll explain how they work.

[00:08:13] So dopamine is what tells you that you're about to get a reward. And in the animal world, nobody gives you food. So you have to look for food all the time. So when you see food in the distance and your brain says, wow, that's what I need because you're hungry. And so. The good feeling of dopamine is released and that motivates you to go toward food.

[00:08:38] So in the human world, when we get food so easily and effortlessly, we don't get so much dopamine. Although, you know, like if you're really hungry and you get home and nobody's feeding you and you have to cook, and it's like, then you get excited about the actions. But in normal life, if you just call for a pizza and shovel it in your face, [00:09:00] then you have to do other things to get the excitement of dopamine.

[00:09:05] And in the best-case scenario, you plan, you take steps and you have a positive outcome. Okay. So that's what works. So that's just the dopamine part, but then we have the serotonin part of the oxytocin part. So the oxytocin part is the urge for social support and in the animal world. You need a herd to be protected from predators, but it's not like you think like the herd is all wanting to protect you.

[00:09:39] They are all just trying to push their way to the center so that they're not the ones that get eaten by the predator. And that's why social life is so frustrating. because we have these idealized views and we have a selfish urge for safety, but so does everybody [00:10:00] else. So that's why social trust is hard to build.

[00:10:04] And the better you understand it, the more you can take effective steps to build trust with individuals too. Like, I will reciprocate if you reciprocate. So, and the last one I'll just explain is serotonin. And this is the feeling of pride or confidence or assertion. And it's really social strength, social power.

[00:10:29] And we're often told that it's wrong to feel pride and to feel important, but in fact, that's what our brain is always looking for. And if you always. Put yourself below others, then you don't get it and you end up frustrated and resentful. So it's a skill to learn how I can be proud without putting other people down.

[00:10:53] So that's the complicated challenge of happiness

[00:11:00] **Me:** How do we rewire ourselves to happiness?

[00:11:03] **Loretta Breuning:** So all of those, what I explained, whatever triggered your dopamine in the past wires you. That's how I'm going to get it today. Whatever triggered your serotonin or oxytocin in the past, wired you. That's how you look for it and expect it today. But everybody's past is just a random collection of experiences.

[00:11:26] So nobody has like a perfect GPS to do it in the perfect way. So that's why we all can use some rewiring sometimes when you realize that your impulses are leading you in a direction that's not useful. So the simplest example is if the way you get dopamine is by calling for a pizza delivery. Or eating another box of cookies or playing another video game and you realize, "Gee, I would be better off if I could get excited [00:12:00] about a useful project and taking small steps toward a useful project!"

[00:12:05] That's another way to stimulate dopamine, but it's hard to get started if you don't already do that. But if you take the first few steps, you'll start getting the dopamine and that will build a new pathway and then you keep taking the steps and you will rewire yourself.

[00:12:24] **Me:** Awesome! So what are your books about? You've written so many.

[00:12:29] **Loretta Breuning:** Yeah! My introductory book is called Habits of a Happy Brain: Retrain your Brain to Boost Your Serotonin, Dopamine, Oxytocin, and Endorphin. (https://www.amazon.com/Habits-Happy-Brain-Serotonin-Endorphin/dp/1440590508)

[00:12:40] So that's exactly the simple introduction to what I just said. And for people who don't want to read a whole book, I created a series of five minute videos that explains all of what I just said, and it's a humorous video, so it's fun to watch and you could send your friends and it's on YouTube and [00:13:00] it's also at my website. (https://innermammalinstitute.org/happypower)

[00:13:01] If you click videos on my website is Innermmammalinstitute.org. And if you only have two minutes, I created an animation that explains all of this. And then I have two other books one of them is called The Science of Positivity: Stop Negative Thought Patterns by Changing Your Brain Chemistry (https://www.amazon.com/Science-Positivity-Negative-Patterns-Chemistry/dp/1440599653). And then my newest one is called Tame Your Anxiety: Rewiring Yourself for Happiness (https://www.amazon.com/Tame-Your-Anxiety-Rewiring-Happiness/dp/1538117762)

[00:13:28] ...Well, it's good to be the King of a podcast, isn't it?

[00:13:31] **Me:** I mean, you've got one too.

[00:13:34] **Loretta Breuning:** Yes, I do. It's called The Happy Brain. (listen here: https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/the-happy-brain/id1377502232) I decided to rewrite the book for teenagers because everybody who reads the book says, Oh, I wish I knew this when I was young. So, one thing I really want to talk about in the teen book is popularity, because it's amazing to learn that monkeys obsess over popularity and for the same reasons.

[00:14:00] So in the animal world, there's a few things. So animals, they're born attached to their parents, but their parents will not live forever and monkeys have a much shorter life span, and so they have to have survival skills so they can survive once their parents are gone. And they have to say, let's say dating skills, because otherwise their genes would be wiped out forever.

[00:14:28] So what does it take to date successfully in the monkey world? Well, you would be amazed that it's the same as in the human world. It takes the willingness to take risks, a healthy appearance, and social alliances. And that is basically the core of popularity in the human world. Now, we all know that a lot of popularities stupid things that are bad for you in the long run, and you're better off without, and so it's a [00:15:00] very hard decision to have to make.

[00:15:02] Fortunately, we're not as much in a hurry to pass on our genes as monkeys are, so we get to take our time and learn to make these decisions with more accumulated information. And yet when popularity stimulates our happy chemicals because that's the brain we've inherited.

[00:15:23] So that's like a temptation to make bad decisions. So it's all very complicated and it was very relieving for me to read about how this works in animals, because like. "Wow! Oh, so it's not me. It's like this is really going on!" And the amazing thing is a lot of monkeys die young, but they've already passed their genes on.

[00:15:47] It's like live fast and die young and just leave a lot of babies. That's not really what I'm going for. So some monkeys do that, but like we have a big [00:16:00] brain cause we could choose not to do that.

[00:16:02] **Me:** Awesome. Have you ever considered writing a book for kids?

[00:16:06] **Loretta Breuning:** Ha! Well, I did the animation and I thought, maybe that would be good for kids. It's only two minutes. And really funny thing happened. I did a, a podcast for dads, and I asked the dad, you know, show my animation to your kids. So one kid was five and one kid was seven, and he said, the five year old said, "How long is this?!"

[00:16:32] But the seven year old said he liked it. But I'm still waiting for more feedback from the seven year old, so I haven't gotten that yet. So I should write and ask him. But I have to tell you that the introduction to my teen book, I've sent it to about a dozen teams and I haven't gotten any feedback yet.

[00:16:51] So part of the advice in all of my books is don't wait for applause. So I may have to at some point just [00:17:00] write it without waiting for feedback.

[00:17:03] **Me:** Why don't our brains go negative?

[00:17:04] **Loretta Breuning:** Yeah! So our brains go negative for two reasons: one of them is cortisol, which you may have heard of, is called the stress chemical. And it's the chemical that tells an animal that it's about to be attacked by a predator. So when a gazelle smells a lion, it gets a really bad feeling and the gazelle would rather just keep eating grass.

[00:17:27] So why does it run? Because cortisol feels so bad that you can't think about anything else until you do something to make it go away. So that's what stress is, and that's what motivates a gazelle to run when it smells a lion. Now, our brain is biased toward the negative, which means if you have to choose between running from a lion or eating more grass. You're only going to survive if you run! So that's why we're biased towards the negative. Now, the other reason is [00:18:00] because every time your happy chemicals turn on, they only turn on for a short time. So whether it's the pizza or the good feeling of finishing your math homework, you get some dopamine, but it only lasts for a short time and then it's gone. So if you imagine you’re a cave man and then you find something good to eat and you're all excited, but then the good food is gone. So you have to keep looking. So our brain only releases good feelings for a short time because we have to always keep looking.

[00:18:33] And that's why our ancestors survive. So when the good feeling stops, it's like ohhhh, it's like if you have an ice cream and then the ice cream is done and now you have to face reality again. So that's, that's the challenge of being human.

[00:18:49] **Me:** But one thing that I think that you have mentioned a little bit, but we should probably mention more: Why do we have power over our brains?

[00:18:58] **Loretta Breuning:** Good, good! So why we have [00:19:00] power over our brains. We are born with billions of neurons, but no connections between them. And that's what makes us different from animals is that animals are already hooked up once they're born. So when a turtle is born, you may have seen the turtles hatching out of their shells, and then they run straight to the ocean and they swim and they look for food.

[00:19:25] So you don't even have a childhood because they're already born, hardwired with whatever they need to know. Whereas a human is born with no skills and they can't do anything. They can't even lift their head for a few months, you know? So we humans have to learn survival skills from experience, and those survival skills include self management and managing your emotions as well as the skills that it takes in the modern world to earn a living or the skills [00:20:00] that it took in our ancestors world to look for food. So we learn these skills in a few ways, but the main way is by watching the people around us and imitating what they do.

[00:20:12] And that's what wires our brains. And that's what makes us not animals, but if I were raised in the woods with wolves, I would be, you know, not exactly the same as a wolf, but not that different.

[00:20:29] **Me:** So you said that we have like an emotions brain and a normal brain.

[00:20:34] verbal brain, my bad. So we have the two brains right. How do animals have that emotions brain? How does that work for them?

[00:20:44] **Loretta Breuning:** Very good. Okay, so if you have a line between turtles and humans, from turtles, you go to small mammals like mice, and then you go to bigger mammals like dogs. And so there's the [00:21:00] what I call the verbal brain. You could call it the cortex, and then there's the animal brain. So a turtle has almost no cortex at all.

[00:21:10] A mouse has a teeny-weeny cortex. A dog's cortex is a little bigger. A monkey's cortex is like three times as big as a dog. An ape’s cortex is like three times as big as a monkey. And a human cortex is like three times as big as an ape. So the more cortex you have, the more ability you have to control your emotional brain.

[00:21:36] So animals do whatever their emotional chemicals tell them. Whereas humans have the ability to put on the brakes and say, "Do I want to go with my first choice or do I want to think about it? And that's really what it is to be human is to be constantly saying, "Do I want to go with my first choice [00:22:00] or do I want to think about it and come up with a second choice?"

[00:22:03] When you come up with a second choice, then you feed that to your animal brain. Your animal brain is the one that has to step on the gas and go for it. And man, maybe your human brain will say, "No, the second choice isn't really good either. I'm going to look for another choice." But if you just debate forever, then you would starve to death.

[00:22:26] So you have to find some good choices. so that's why we can't just use our human brain. You have to like get excited about one of your choices. You can't be against all of them. But then if you just go with your animal brain, and you always do whatever comes to you automatically, you're basically just repeating whatever you absorb from the world around you, whether it's really good for you in the long run or not.

[00:22:57] **Me:** Awesome. So that cortex brain, [00:23:00] not the same size, as you've mentioned, in certain animals. Why is that and how does that affect it?

[00:23:06] **Loretta Breuning:** Why is that? Well, over time, if you make a line from turtles to humans, and of course we could include fish and snails if we want to, you know, get the big picture, but let's just go from turtles to mice, to dogs, to monkeys, to apes, to humans.

[00:23:30] So the cortex gets bigger, the childhood gets longer because it takes time to hook up a cortex, 'cause a cortex is not born wired up so. Turtles have no attachment to their parents and no parenting and no nurturing and no, bonding. And so...

[00:23:54] **Me:** Kind of depressing.

[00:23:55] **Loretta Breuning:** Cortex, the more attachment, the more nurturing, the more [00:24:00] bonding, the more learning from others, and the longer the life expectancy.

[00:24:07] So the bigger the brain, the longer the life expectancy. And the bigger the brain, the longer the gestation, the longer before a baby is born along the rafter conception that it takes to develop that big brain. And the more protein is necessary to create that big brain. And it takes intelligence to find the protein actually.

[00:24:33] **Me:** Cool! Let's just run off the path for a second. You've been on a lot of stuff. What was your favorite thing to do? Like you know, appearances you've done.

[00:24:45] **Loretta Breuning:** Well, I have to say that I have done some. Facebook live type things in Spanish. So that was so exciting for me, and I got to do a book tour. Next call. I was on the radio in Spanish and [00:25:00] I have to tell you that my span, and I was even like on the Mexican equivalent of good morning America, and I have to tell you that my Spanish is not that good hahaha.

[00:25:11] So like this fear of like "Am I going to understand the questions? Cause I could always come up with words, but what if I don't understand the questions?" So you know, fear actually builds a pathway in your brain -- that's the cortisol, the stress thing. That's how a gazelle learns to remember where the lions are.

[00:25:32] So it's like, Oh my God. So that moment of being on that. Mexican, good morning America, and I was like, Oh my God, I understand what they're saying. Again, I'm coming up with words. So that was mind blowing. And I'm doing it in French in a couple of months. My friend who's a lot better than my Spanish, but these French seminars are gonna be like all day long and I have to do it with other people and I don't necessarily [00:26:00] agree with the philosophy of the other people.

[00:26:02] **Me:** Yeah. That's gotta be hard, but then, you know, just having to be immersed in a language is really cool, but also really crazy up in here.

[00:26:13] **Loretta Breuning:** Yeah, yeah, yeah.

[00:26:14] **Me:** What other languages do you know?

[00:26:16] **Loretta Breuning:** Well, I can read Italian sort of. I mean, just like the basics. and, so that's it. But I studied other languages when I was young, but I didn't follow up on them.

[00:26:29] It was my interest, and you know, when you're young, so neuroplasticity is high when you're young and you store things easily, and then when you get, it's actually good. Think of it like paving on a road. So the connections built between neurons and the neural pathway gets paved and then electricity flows easily.

[00:26:52] Down one of the paved pathways. And that's why we all use the neural pathways that we built when we were young. So [00:27:00] when you speak your native language, you're using neural pathways that you built when you were young and you were not aware of building them. But if you've spent any time with the baby, you see how much repetition the family goes through to teach a baby how to talk. And that's how much work it takes to build a foreign language. And then as you get older, you have less of the paving. So then you're trying to build new roads is a lot of work and they're not even paved. So that's basically that problem.

[00:27:33] So what, what I think people need to know is that small steps are all it takes for your brain to feel good. So many people like tell you to focus on a dream, and it's sort of like an addiction because if you focus on the dream, then you feel good for a few minutes, but it's sort of like a monkey thinks, "Oh, I think I see a whole big bunch of bananas." But if you never get closer to the [00:28:00] bananas, then your brain doesn't release the good feeling of dopamine. So you have to actually get closer to the bananas to feel good. So instead of having a big dream, if you think of "What's like a small goal for this week and seven small steps that I could take toward it?", you're going to feel much better, you're going to release dopamine, and you're going to build a pathway that expects to feel good, and then you can expect to keep taking steps and keep feeling good.

[00:28:31] **Me:** Awesome. This is actually really helpful in general for I'm sure most people.

[00:28:38] **Loretta Breuning:** Yes, thank you! That's why I wanted to be on.

[00:28:42] **Me:** Also, I just love your background right now. I just feel like I'm in the jungle kind of.

[00:28:47] **Loretta Breuning:** Yeah, I always talk about, being in a jungle of neurons and that's why we're always tempted to take the old paths, but we have billions of other neurons that we could [00:29:00] activate, but it's like blazing a new trail in the jungle, and when you try to do that, you feel lost.

[00:29:06] And that's again, the challenge of being human. How about I just have one more thing and then I have to go. So, that is social comparison. So we're always comparing ourselves to others because monkeys are always comparing themselves to others. And the reason is that if a monkey grabs for a banana and a bigger monkey had his eye on that banana, the bigger monkey will actually bite the smaller monkey. And the smaller monkey doesn't want to get bitten, so it pulls back, and then it's always comparing itself to others, and it will not reach for a banana unless it sees that it's the bigger monkey. So that's why people. Who have perfectly good life may drive themselves crazy, because they always think the other monkey is bigger and they always think they're not going to get the banana, and they always feel threatened. And in [00:30:00] fact, the other monkey will always look bigger if you think, well, this person has better, you know, better this and that person has better that, you know? And so, we need to focus on our own strengths in a healthy way. So it's not like I'm stronger and so I'm going to bite you and take the banana. But that internally, we can feel confident in our own strengths so that we feel like we can get the banana when we need it.

[00:30:29] And that's the feeling of serotonin.

[00:30:32] **Me:** Awesome. Thank you. This has been really awesome.

[00:30:35] **Loretta Breuning:** Thank you.

[00:30:36] **Me:** You really should write something for kids cause I feel like I'm watching a kids program.

[00:30:41] **Loretta Breuning:** Thank you. Thank you. Okay, well maybe I'll just take this and set it to a cartoon.

[00:30:47] Okie-doke. Well it was great to meet you!

[00:30:49] **Me:** Yes! Have a great day!

[00:30:52] **Loretta Breuning:** Thank you. Take care. Bye bye.

[00:30:55] **End Song:** It's the end! It's the end! This podcast is [00:31:00] over; it's the end! It's time to turn off this episode. This podcast is over, it's the end!