



SPRING 2018 NEWSLETTER

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Kids In The Middle®

## PERSON SPOTLIGHT: DR. TIM BONO, PHD

By Matt Dirnbeck

Welcome to the Happy to Give newsletter where we update our readers on the latest news from H2G and spotlight happy people doing happy things in our local community!

This issue's spotlight person is Dr. Tim Bono. Dr. Bono is a Professor of Psychology at Washington University here in Saint Louis. His undergraduate course entitled the "Psychology of Happiness" is the most in-demand course

on campus and he recently published a book entitled *When Likes Aren't Enough: A Crash Course in the Science of Happiness*. Additionally, Tim has delivered TED talks and serves as an expert consultant on a number of national media outlets such as CNN, Fast Company, The Associated Press and several public radio stations. I had the pleasure of sitting down with Dr. Bono to talk a little more about the science of happiness.

**MD:** So your course on Positive Psychology fills the largest lecture hall on campus, three-hundred seats, and has the longest wait list of any course in campus by a large margin: in the hundreds. So what's going on here? Are you selling some sort of magic elixir? Why are so many young people interested in a course on happiness?

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**DTB:** If we think of happiness as a simple, mathematical formula, it would look like this:

$$\text{Happiness} = \frac{\text{What we have}}{\text{What we want to have}}$$

Now, this isn't precisely an empirical formula like in physics or engineering, but rather a bit of a metaphor. Still, simple math tells us that there are two ways to increase our happiness "quotient": 1) increase the numerator or 2) decrease the denominator. Most of us get hung up on option 1 and we chase things like more money, bigger houses, nicer cars, fancier clothes, more exotic vacations and the like, and those things do in fact make us happier, but it is fleeting. The reason for that is a phenomenon called "hedonic adaptation" which means that once we achieve something, whether that be a six-figure salary, getting accepted to medical school, achieving the childhood dream of performing on Broadway, or even a Boston-qualifying marathon time or a smaller dress size, eventually these things become our new normal and with time our happiness returns to baseline. Research has shown that even though the average per person income has almost tripled in the past 50 years, the percentage of people describing themselves as "very happy" has remained constant at about 30-35% and has actually been trending downward since the early 2000's. We have more, but we want *even* more.

**MD:** So if increasing our numerator will only get us stuck on the "hedonic treadmill", then how can we decrease our denominator? Do we need to give up all of our creature comforts, stop trying to progress our careers and live like hermits?

**DTB:** Haha, I guess you could, which some people have done, but you don't need to take it to that extreme in order to be happy. The goal is not to achieve a zero value for the denominator, but rather to keep the "What we want" category in check by our own agency rather than allowing it to inflate uncontrollably.

First, we need to stop comparing ourselves to others. Teddy Roosevelt once said: "Comparison is the thief of joy." In one study, college students were given two scenarios: A) Working at Company A where they would be making \$35,000 while their peers would be making \$38,000 or B) Working at Company B where they would be making \$33,000 while their peers would be making \$30,000. Nearly two-thirds of the participants chose option B where they would be making less money in absolute terms but more money relative to their peers! That's why social media has proliferated things like FOMO (fear of missing out) and "Pinterest envy". The happiest people derive their value not by comparing themselves to other people but rather from within.

Second, we can ground our lives in gratitude, which can be as simple as a shift in perspective. In one study, two groups of students were asked to journal about things that happened in their daily lives. One group was told to write about things they were thankful for while the other group was told to write about "hassles". While writing about hassles may seem to be a cathartic experience, it was actually the gratitude group that reported feeling better about their lives overall, had a more optimistic outlook, and even got sick less frequently.

So if you feel like your attachment to social media might be dragging you down, next time you feel the temptation to scroll through your Instagram feed, consider writing down a few things you're thankful for instead!

**MD:** So what are some concrete things we can do to have an attitude of gratitude...sorry for using a cliché there.

**DTB:** Haha, that's perfectly alright. So per that previous study, keeping a gratitude journal is a simple way of doing that. One of my students keeps a jar on her desk and every day she writes down something she is thankful for and puts it in the jar. Even on her worst days she still finds something to be thankful for, even if it's as simple as getting out of bed or having enough food to eat. A pair of my students who are room mates conclude each

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day by telling each other things they are thankful for as they are getting ready for bed. Married people, this is something you could do with your spouse or your kids, and single people I bet your cat or your dog wouldn't mind hearing about things you're thankful for as you're turning out your lights. Pets are fantastic listeners. There is a lot of research showing the simple value of putting our emotions into words.

**MD:** Happy to Give is all about philanthropy. How does giving relate to happiness?

**DTB:** Directly, actually! We're often told to "treat ourselves" to something in the interest of self-care, like a massage or an extra large caramel latte after submitting a major project at work or getting through a big test at school, which makes sense, but actually the opposite is true! Researchers in Canada gave college students a small amount of money to spend by 5:00 that evening and split them into two groups. One group was instructed to spend the money on themselves while the other group was instructed to spend the money on someone else. When they surveyed the students at the end of the experiment, they found that the students who spent the money on someone else were significantly happier than those who spent it on themselves.

**MD:** Dang, I always thought I was on the right track by practicing those little self-care type of things.

**DTB:** Well, you're not entirely off the mark. The same researchers in Canada repeated their experiment only this time they gave their students \$10 Starbucks gift cards and divided them into three groups, instructing each to: 1) spend it on themselves, 2) give it to someone else, or 3) spend it by treating themselves and a friend both to a cup of coffee. Consistent with their previous study, group 2 scored higher than group 1, but the third group who took a friend to get coffee and treated scored the highest of the three.

**MD:** So if we extrapolate the results of that study, let's say I had \$120 and had the choice of spending it on myself, straight up giving it to charity, or entering the Happy Gilmore Day golf tournament with three of my buddies, my best option, which is grounded in legitimate, peer-reviewed scientific research, would be to spend it on my entry fee for Happy Gilmore Day?

**DTB:** Absolutely!

**MD:** I think that's a great place to wrap! Thank you so much for your time and I can't wait to share this with our readers! 

## 2018 Happy Gilmore Day Tournament Registration and Sponsorship Info

**When:** Saturday, July 28

**Where:** Florissant Golf Club, 50 Country Club Ln. Florissant MO 63033

**Time:** Registration opens at 11:00 am for a 12:00 shotgun start.

**Register at:** <https://happygilmoreday18.eventbrite.com>

**Early-bird rates end July 1!**

**Sponsorship packages** available starting at \$250

Visit <https://goo.gl/MuFe8V> or contact Andy at [happytogivestl@gmail.com](mailto:happytogivestl@gmail.com) for more information. 

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