S1E2: Transcript

The first in a special, 5-part Covid-19 conversation series

with Dr. Barbara Fredrickson

The Power of Positivity in a Pandemic

Tavia Gilbert: Welcome to Stories of Impact. I'm producer Tavia Gilbert, and in every episode of this series, journalist Richard Sergay and I bring you a conversation about the newest scientific research on human flourishing, and how those discoveries can be translated into practical tools.

This podcast is the first of five special episodes focusing on Covid-19. Today we're in conversation with Dr. Barbara Fredrickson, director of the Positive Emotions and Psychophysiology Lab at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Richard speaks with Dr. Fredrickson about why her work in positive psychology is more relevant than ever during the pandemic. And she offers tips on how to nurture our positive emotions and resilience amid the stress and anxiety we are all experiencing, as well as how to foster strong social connections post-Covid-19.

Barbara Fredrickson: My name is Barbara Fredrickson. I'm a professor at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. I study positive emotions. I've studied them for most of my career and know, so that spans a range from looking at how they affect people's thinking, their physiology, and now more and more their relationships and connections with other people.

Richard Sergay: You're known for coining a term positivity resonance. Why might that be so important during the Covid-19 pandemic?

Barbara Fredrickson: It turns out that the parts of social interaction that really fuel us are ones when we co-experience positive emotions, and that shows up not only in a shared feeling, but also in synchrony that emerges between people. Some of that synchrony you can see in terms of nonverbal synchrony, and other aspects of that synchrony you can't really see because it's occurring at the level of heart rate and other aspects of our biochemistry. And also there's a caring component to that. So when there's mutual care, shared positive affect, and this synchrony that runs through both biology and nonverbal

behavior, that's the definition I use of positivity resonance, and it seems to be like this magic moment that is not only greatly rewarding, but contributes a lot to our health and wellbeing.

Richard Sergay: So at the moment we're going through long periods of isolation, loss of loved ones, jobs, financial insecurity, stress of whatever this new normal is—almost a mental health crisis on a global scale, stress and anxiety. What should people be doing to stay positive and cope with the moment?

Barbara Fredrickson: Yeah, I think a first most important thing is to recognize that the stress and negativity we feel is really warranted and natural, and we shouldn't try to push it out of mind. We need to accept it first before we can successfully kind of add in some positive emotions. So one frequent misunderstanding of positive psychology is that we should never feel negative, we should always feel positive, and that's just not realistic. And it's also not how humans are made. So we need to accept our negative emotions, make sure we're not perseverating in them or prolonging them longer than their value, but also deliberately try to cultivate the positive emotions, which is harder in the current times that we're in. But every moment that includes another breath is one where we can be grateful that we're still breathing, grateful that we still have some of our relationships intact and find moments where you can find shared joys with other people, whether that's trying out new recipes at home or calling an old friend that you haven't talked to in a long time, just to make sure they're okay and catching up on their lives.

So there's things that we can do to add in positive emotions. What we know from my lab's prior work on resilience is that resilient people experience like a full spectrum of emotions in difficult times: They experience the sadness and the anger and the anxiety in addition to the gratitude, the hope and the love. And the people who are less resilient just get stuck in the negative.

Richard Sergay: Speaking of resilience, how do you stay resilient and optimistic when so much about the world is unknown?

Barbara Fredrickson: Well, because it's so hard to plan anything right now, drawing on our skills to stay in the present moment are evermore important, and accepting that we don't know. A lot of times we can calm our negative emotional states just simply by accepting that that's the way the world is right now. There's some really nice research to help explain this phenomenon. It's really

well-established that older people experience more positive emotions and are happier than younger people, and what seems to account for that is older people are more likely to accept negative emotions as, that's part of life. You know, like, Oh yeah, this is one of those difficult situations, as opposed to finding it all new and unacceptable.

So one way to stay resilient is to recognize negative emotions are just part of the process. Another way is to find those ways to increase positive emotions because there's this upward spiral dynamic between positive emotions and growing resilience. Resilience isn't just something some people have and some people don't; it's a resource that can be built through creating positive connections with others and positive emotional experiences.

Richard Sergay: You mentioned staying present, I think of the present as really scary. So how do you cope? I mean, I've been reading research that says people are doubling down on their worst habits to cope with the mental and emotional stress of the pandemic. Liquor sales are up 75%, wine 66% beer 42%, pot smoking all-time high, eating comfort foods. We seem to be trying to find a panacea for this very scary moment that's in the present. So help me understand that.

Barbara Fredrickson: Yeah, it's true that the broader scale is scary. The ways, though, we get ourselves to feel more anxious sometimes is by engaging in both time and geographical mental travel where we're not truly in the moment that we are in, like sitting here having a conversation together. So we worry about what is happening in other communities—rightfully, because we're compassionate people—and we also think about what if, what if, what if this had been different? What will it be like in two months from now? And there's a time and a place for having those thoughts, but it's not all day long. You know, we can't continue with that sort of thinking about how all the tragedies of the world are unfolding, because we'll get to a compassion fatigue or compassion burnout or collapse of compassion is what it's called sometimes.

And so we need to be able to balance that out with some self-care. And that self-care is distinct from the self-medication that you're describing in terms of, you know, increasing alcohol and drug use and eating sugar and comfort foods. You know, there's room for some of that but not to the exclusion of maybe other things that we could do to take care of ourselves—prioritize connecting with people in meaningful ways, prioritize activities that you know will help bring a sense of peace or calm. Maybe

that's more time in nature or more time doing a favorite hobby or learning something new. I mean, those are things that reliably increase people's positive emotions.

And sometimes we need to do the more effortful versions of ways to increase our positive emotions and not the tried and true, let me have a drink, or let me have that, you know, candy or sugar or whatever it is. So bringing awareness to what we're doing to regulate our emotions I think is really important. That's where this mindfulness being in the moment could be helpful. Just thinking, Oh, I'm not feeling comfortable right now. What would be a healthy way to deal with that discomfort?

Richard Sergay: So a prescription—and I'm curious how you deal with it personally—about managing anxiety and increasing positive emotions like gratitude and kindness, which I know your work centers around. What would you say to someone to help them get to that place in what has become almost a virtual world for us at the moment?

Barbara Fredrickson: Right, right. Well, one is to limit your intake of the news. I think once a day is plenty, personally. I check in on headlines about once a day and try not to overdo it, because within a day there's a lot of recycling of headlines and news stories and we'll be plenty informed if we stay connected once a day instead of all day. And that's a big shift for a lot of people. A lot of people want to keep track of this forest fire really closely because it's scary. But being able to notice the toll that that takes on one's own emotions is important. And trying to find limits and boundaries around it. I tend to get my news by reading instead of watching video clips or watching television because I want to be able to not get so emotionally hijacked by it, because I think it's important for me to be able to be grounded and steady so I can be a good mom and a good spouse and a good friend. I also try to take time in nature, take time connecting with friends.

I've found that I hate connecting with friends by Zoom, and I really like connecting with friends by telephone. And I think it's because there's so much disfluency when the video is just slightly off, you can't really make eye contact. So positivity resonance, this idea of this, you know, feeling as one, acting as one is harder to get to when you're getting some garbled cues, which is what happens when we try to connect through digital means. So the old-fashioned phone call I think is better in that we just have the voice and we're not getting misfiring information visually. And so our brains maybe have an easier time just kind of filling in the gaps, visualizing our friend talking to us instead of seeing them sort of half talk to us and

half look away, and, you know, I think connection can be better when the mode of communication—voice only—is really true to form. And I think it's certainly better to speak on the phone than to send an email because the voice carries so much emotion information that allows you to sort of connect with a person's emotions in real time.

Richard Sergay: So I notice when I'm walking, taking my daily or more than daily walks around my neighborhood and occasionally wear a mask and say hi to someone. They actually really can't see my smile or my face or actually hearing me very well. So what happens to face-to-face positivity resonance when people's faces are covered with masks?

Barbara Fredrickson: Yeah, it's going to be a really important obstacle to overcome as we begin to move outside our homes and into public spaces more often. In America, we're known for being the smilers, you know, and mask-wearing is normative in cultures that haven't had so much smiling in public. And so we might need to compensate for that with kind of bigger gestures and other ways like more upper face smiling indications, you know, with eyebrows or more gestures that are full body, like putting your hand on your heart and, you know, giving somebody a nod hello instead of relying on the smile, which is predominantly a lower face activity, and if you're behind a mask, people are going to miss that. And the other possibility is to compensate with words. Say, "I'm happy to see you!" You know, because the smile can't carry that information for you.

So one of the reasons—there's some really elegant research on this—one of the reasons Americans tend to smile more is because we're a melting pot culture, and there's greater expressivity in cultures that have many different cultures feeding into them, and less facial expressivity of positive emotions in cultures that haven't had the migration history that the United States has. And you know, it makes sense if you don't share a, a language very well, then you need to make your face do more of the communication. So that seems to be a reasonable explanation for the differences across cultures and the degree of smiling.

Richard Sergay: With social distancing social cues that we take for granted, like hand-shaking, hugging, are going to have to go away. How do we deal with that?

Barbara Fredrickson: Yeah, I think we're going to need to be creative, because just taking away the ways we express a welcoming attitude and kindness and just delight to

be reunited with a friend or an acquaintance or to meet somebody for the first time, you know, we don't just want to subtract cues. I think it will be important to be deliberate about creating new signals that can convey warmth and delight.

So one that my sister shared with me that seemed to make a big difference was, she was going to an in-person meeting before lockdown, but as people were starting to get concerned with hugs and handshakes and, they decided in that group to very deliberately look in each other's eyes, put their hand on their heart, and you know, kind of greet each other with a nod. And she said she felt more welcomed that day than most days. Maybe because it was new, but because it, it conveyed sort of a heartfelt warmth and a presence. So we might need to use our eye contact more. We might need to use other nonverbal gestures.

Richard Sergay: Social integration is often associated with more robust immune responses, especially for fending off viruses. How might our immune system be affected by social distancing?

Barbara Fredrickson: It's kind of an irony that we're having to cut out one of the health behaviors—I think of positive social connection as a health behavior. We're needing to cut out a health behavior that actually fortifies our ability to fend off viruses. Now that's a product of evolution that is a, you know, really smart design in that when we are around a lot of people, our immune system gets ready to defend against viruses because that's the primary microbial threat that we face when we're around a lot of people. So this is why finding other ways to feel socially integrated even while we are physically more distant from one another is important. Social distancing doesn't have to mean social isolation. So that's why the phone calls with loved ones and ways to continue to express positivity and delight to strangers and acquaintances when we start moving into public spaces more frequently will be important.

Richard Sergay: What do you think happens if our interactions with strangers in public spaces or local Starbucks fail to rebound once restrictions are relaxed? What's that look like?

Barbara Fredrickson: Yeah, I think there's a possibility that they won't rebound as much because people will be concerned about, you know, viral transmission. I think until we have a vaccine, there's going to be some concerns that just interacting with people at any level is dangerous, and so we should kind of hold back.

The trouble with that as an approach is that we know from our research that we describe in the video that you created, there's a connection between our day to day positive interactions with strangers and acquaintances in particular and a set of virtues that you might call communal virtues like compassion, kindness, humility, feeling of unity or solidarity or oneness, that those kind of communal virtues are nourished by our positive interactions with strangers and acquaintances in particular.

Those kinds of interactions, which are by sociologists called weak ties as opposed to our, our strong ties with friends and coworkers, the weak tie interaction, strangers and acquaintances, is the source of these communal virtues. That's my hypothesis and our data suggests that you can build those virtues through interacting with strangers and acquaintances. The reason this ends up being important is we just collected some data on people's effort that they put into preventing the spread of Covid-19, and we find that above and beyond people's concern for their own health, their communal virtues predict the effort that they put into social distancing and hand-washing, and now we're going to be measuring in the next wave, you know, wearing face coverings. So part of what we need to help prevent the spread of the virus is a concern for other people's health.

Richard Sergay: Hmm.

Barbara Fredrickson: But if we don't interact with strangers and acquaintances, we might erode that concern for other people's health. And so there's reason to stick with it and find those creative ways to connect with other people in public. Because that's part of what helps us care about protecting public health.

Richard Sergay: Also, what helps herd immunity come about, too. If we're not interacting, we risk ironically potentially being susceptible to more viruses, more flus, if we're not connecting, correct?

Barbara Fredrickson: Exactly. And that's that connection between our immune system's preparation for viruses seems to be strengthened the more socially integrated people are, and weakened the more lonely and socially isolated they are. So yes, there's some really interesting takes on this where we need to stay connected so that, one, herd immunity and, also, that we care about each other enough to care about each other. So we don't want to potentially inadvertently erode those communal virtues that we need to rely on right now for that spirit of we're all in this together and the risks I take translate into risks for other people, you know, so that, we need to be

very diligent in our efforts to minimize the spread of the virus for the good of the community.

Richard Sergay: Yet at the same time, Barbara, the reason we're in this pandemic is because of globalization. We are all so close. Correct? There is an irony here.

Barbara Fredrickson: Yeah, yeah, there really is. And it's, you know, fueled by those great examples of human culture working really well. A city as dense as New York City, you know, I mean, that's kind of a miracle that people can live so closely and so densely and find ways to have that work out and generally work smoothly. But obviously that's a great recipe for disaster in terms of the spread of the virus. It is a sad irony.

Richard Sergay: Couple of last questions. Assuming that a vaccine is 12 to 18 months away and stay-at-home orders can't be maintained that long, how might the fear of contracting Covid-19 effect or opportunities for achieving everyday love?

Barbara Fredrickson: There are two preconditions for positivity resonance, which is what I'm arguing is everyday love, and one of them we've talked about already, which was the sensory connection that you get from a shared phone call that you wouldn't get from writing an email, and that sensory connection that's just a little bit off with video conferencing. The other precondition is a sense of safety, and that sense of safety is something that you know, ebbs and flows depending on what context we're in. And so, you know, fears of contracting the virus do end up, you know as I mentioned earlier, motivating us to kind of hang back from interaction with other people. And so a lack of sense of safety is a hurdle to get over and we're going to need to recognize which situations are fairly safe and therefore we can interact in a safe way from six feet away. You know, thankfully we have words that we can say, "I'm happy to see you," so we can still connect from 10 feet away. It's just going to take some learning to figure out how to do that best.

Richard Sergay: Sounds like we're going to be rewriting psychology for a long time in your field.

Barbara Fredrickson: Yes. I'm really interested in this process of, everybody needs to learn new norms for interaction. It's a big experiment. I'm actually hoping to get

some grant funds to be able to track this process as people learn new ways to connect with one another. It could be that some people won't want to learn new ways, and that puts, you know, those communities and people at risk. It remains to be seen as to how people will handle this next phase, but it's been really encouraging to see how people have handled this initial phase, so I have confidence that people will creatively get this learning accomplished.

Richard Sergay: Last question, so as you peek into the next six months to a year, what does this new normal look like for you?

Barbara Fredrickson: I think that knowing that cultural differences and the expression of positive emotion arose for kind of structural reasons, that in the US melting pot culture, people learned to smile bigger and more frequently in order to communicate friendliness and safety to one another. Knowing that history of how cultural differences in positive expressivity evolved gives me hope that in this new situation we can figure out how to signal our warmth and the safety of "I'm friendly, I'm not dangerous," in other ways that will creatively work around it, like I said, with bigger nonverbal gestures or with words, you know, we might have to now count on the fact that we do know the same language and say, "Hey, I'm really happy to see you," in times when we would otherwise just rely on a warm smile.

Richard Sergay: Are you an optimist?

Barbara Fredrickson: I am. Sometimes that gets me in trouble, but I'm always thinking that, you know, we will get through this, and it's been scary times, but it's been remarkable to see how people have adapted.

Tavia Gilbert: In our next episode, Richard is going to talk with Erez Yoeli. He's the director of the Applied Cooperation Team at MIT's Sloan School of Management. They'll discuss how to motivate people to cooperate and behave altruistically during a pandemic.

Richard Sergay: We can all do good and cooperate well together as human beings?

Erez Yoeli: Yeah. I think that the data bear that out.

Richard Sergay: And the data based on...? Just help me understand that.

Erez Yoeli: Well, everywhere you look, you see cooperation at an enormous scale, and

you see it underlying every major achievement or milestone that humanity has.

Tavia Gilbert: We look forward to bringing you that full conversation in our next episode. In the meantime, we hope Stories of Impact is a support to you in these difficult times. And we'd be really grateful if you would support us by subscribing to our podcast on your favorite podcast platform. Thank you for listening!

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