

Laurie Santos Says Self-Care Doesn't Have to Be Selfish

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Laurie Santos, a psychology professor at Yale University and host of [The Happiness Lab](#) podcast, is a leading expert in positive psychology, a relatively young field. Since she began teaching “[The Science of Well-Being](#)” in 2018, it has become the most popular course in Yale’s history, with nearly a quarter of students enrolling. The class, now online for free, applies what Dr. Santos calls a “preventative medicine approach” to mental health — harnessing science and evidence to help people lead more fulfilling lives.

Her podcast devoted a full season to episodes contending with [the mental toll of the coronavirus pandemic](#), and she warns in an essay in a forthcoming collection “[Which Side of History? How Technology Is Reshaping Democracy and Our Lives](#)” (out Oct. 13) of the “cognitive costs” of our always-on relationships with our devices.

In a recent telephone interview, which has been edited and condensed, Dr. Santos said that many of her students at Yale have misconceptions about what makes a happy life, and that she too is not immune from having the wrong intuition about the issue.

“One of the most shocking ones for me is a study looking at how simple interactions with strangers positively affect your well-being,” she said, adding that, even for introverts, “a simple chat with a stranger can make people feel great.”

During Covid, we have limited chances for small exchanges — so how can we still fulfill that need?

It’s much harder right now. We need to be much more intentional about it. We need to recognize that it’s missing and that its absence is having a huge effect on our well-being — from the chat with the barista at the coffee shop to the water-cooler interaction with the people in the office. Those things matter for our well-being, but many of us don’t have them anymore, at least not in the same way that we had before the crisis started.

We need to double down on the social connection we do have. In my class, I’ll say, “Hey, I’ll be on Zoom a little bit earlier if you want to just hang out and chat — not about work, but just for some social contact.”

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