What Science Tells Us about Time and Happiness with Ashley Whillans

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Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Roger Dooley

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Roger's new book, *Friction,* is published by McGraw Hill and is now available at Amazon, Barnes & Noble, and bookstores everywhere. Dr Robert Cialdini described the book as, "Blinding insight," and Nobel winner Dr. Richard Claimer said, "Reading Friction will arm any manager with a mental can of WD40."

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Now, here's Roger.

Roger Dooley: Welcome to Brainfluence. I'm Roger Dooley. When the pandemic began, I had visions of all this great spare time on my hands. I wouldn't be flying off to do speeches and workshops. I'd be saving all that travel time, could catch up on stuff that I really wanted to, that I haven't had time to in the proceeding months or years. And the way it worked out, it didn't really happen that way. I found that all the things associated with the crisis converting from doing in-person events to virtual events, hunting for stuff in the grocery store that was in short supply, keeping up with podcast production and my article production, at the end of this, or at least a few months in, I really found that I didn't have that much spare time. And I'm guessing that probably a few of you have had that experience too.

Now this may be Parkinson's law, where the work expands to fill the available time. Today. Fortunately, we have an expert on time and also on the happiness. Ashley Whillans is a professor at Harvard Business School and a leading scholar in the time and happiness research field. Twice, she's been named a rising star of behavioral science by the Behavioral Science and Policy Association. A few years ago, she co-founded a Nudge Unit in British Columbia, a Canadian province. And today she is the author of a new book, Time Smart. So she's well-qualified to help us all with our time problems. Welcome to the show, Ashley.

Ashley Whillans: Thank you so much for having me today.

Roger Dooley: Ashley, first I'd like to ask you about the Nudge Unit you founded in BC. I tried to see if there were any US states that had their own nudge units, and I could not find any. They may exist, and perhaps at some point when this airs, one or two of our audience people will tell me that there are some, but I couldn't... tell me a little bit about that experience of starting up a Nudge Unit, and were there skeptics?

Ashley Whillans: Yeah, so there's been a growing movement in the scientific community around behavioral science and behavioral economics. Just this idea that we want to develop choice architecture, develop our policies and our programs in government and beyond to help people make decisions that are in their own best interest, but that might be a little bit difficult or feel hard in the moment, like saving for retirement, or exercising more, paying bills on time. We want to do all those things, but often demands in

our day-to-day life get in the way from following through on our best intentions to engage at healthier, happier, more productive activities. And so, behavioral science departments or Nudge Units have been founded all over the world. There's about 200 Nudge Units worldwide. And I consider myself a pracademic, meaning I like to do academic research, but I'm really more interested in the application of behavioral science and academic research to practice, hence pracademic. And I decided that it would be really great to try to found a Nudge Unit and work in government to help people live happier, healthier lives through the experimental method.

There were a lot of skeptics, I have to say, even though it's a well-founded practice. Especially in large organizations and institutes, it can be difficult to do things in a new way. And we were trying to bring randomized control trials into various government processes. And that can be very difficult until you show the effect of the first one. So, we were trying to speed up hiring in government, and they wanted to throw more paperwork at the hiring situation. And we ran a very simple experiment, where we took paperwork away and divided it up into small segments to make the hiring process easier and faster. And we reduced the time to hire by about two weeks in government, which is really important because sometimes people don't take government jobs because they can't wait long enough to wait for the result, and they go and take something else.

I'm case in point, actually. So the irony of this is I developed our government's first time to hire, and yet they took such a long time to process my application when I

was applying for a full-time job, that I ended up leaving and going to Harvard Business School instead, because I couldn't wait for this senior government role any longer to have an academic job lined up there. There were definitely some skeptics, but overall, I think companies, government, various marketing professionals are becoming more and more interested in using the insights from behavioral science to change the way that they do business on a day-to-day basis.

Roger Dooley: That's a great example of speeding up the hiring process. My own book, Friction, is all about how effort changes the behavior of humans. And if people have massive paperwork to fill out, they are less likely to apply to begin with. And of course, if the process takes too long, they may well do something else. Although, I think that probably Harvard Business School tops a government job, but you could probably always go back to that government job if you wanted. So congratulations on that.

Explain the concept of time and happiness research. I guess I've encountered occasional papers in doing my own research, but I did not realize this was a whole discipline. What do time and happiness researchers look at, and how are those two things linked?

Ashley Whillans: Great question. I have a PhD in social psychology from the University of British Columbia and work in a lab that studies happiness from a psychological perspective. We really look at two critical ingredients that make up what it means to live a good life, as defined by our unique research area. There's other ways of defining it, but this is the definition I work with. And many other economists and

policy makers work with this definition too, which is that happiness is comprised of two critical factors, the overall evaluation of our life or our reflected experience of our life satisfaction. When we think about our life overall, how well do we think we're doing, this more reflected self? And then there's also this emotional component, which is the amount that we experience joy, stress, sadness, worry on an everyday basis, how much we laugh or smile. And that's the affective or emotional component.

So all of my research really looks at happiness as both this cognitive component and this emotional component. And then I start to ask questions like what can we do in our everyday behavior that isn't driven by our circumstance, it's not based on genetics, but it's under our own control? What are the small decisions we can make around the margins to affect how we feel about our lives and how much joy we experience on an everyday basis? And as my research has uncovered, time use plays a really critical role in our happiness, both the way we think about our lives and how much joy we experience at an everyday basis. So that's really how I became a time and happiness researcher. I was trying to understand what resources do we have that are under our control that could affect happiness.

The way we spend our money and the way we spend our time, of course, there are some of the most important factors that determine our happiness. And so my research has been really looking at this intersection between time and money trade-off. So how our work shapes our time use and happiness, and just generally how we spend time, how much leisure do we have, how much do we

work, how do we feel about our time, how much control do we feel over our time, and how does that impact happiness?

So this is intersection between time and happiness research is pretty new and very interdisciplinary. I borrow from economics, sociology, psychology, and management, and collaborate across disciplines to try to get to the bottom of how we spend our time and how this shapes wellbeing, and really come at it from the subjective wellbeing perspective of trying to understand the root causes of our joy and our misery.

Roger Dooley: So at the behavioral science conferences, I guess the happiness researchers are the ones you want to hang out with, after the papers are presented because they know how to have a good time.

Ashley Whillans: Yeah, absolutely. Our lab definitely had a lot of fun.

Roger Dooley: When you encounter people, do you find... Especially if you talk about time, I'm guessing that almost every time people say, "I don't have enough time. I wish I had more time. If only I had more time," is that true? And why is that

Ashley Whillans: One critical area that I've been studying is this notion of exactly what you're talking about, which is this idea of being time poor, feeling like you have too many things to do and not enough time to do them. And it's very interesting, about 80% of working Americans, regardless of their income, their gender, their personality, report feeling like they have too many things to do and not enough time to do them. So it's a very pervasive

phenomenon, and feeling time poor predicts misery to the same extent as being unemployed. So we know from the academic research that it's a very important phenomena. And it's driven by a lot of different factors, which is why I find this research so fascinating.

So just the idea of time poverty, you might think, well, obviously it's because we're all objectively busier, but the best time use data suggests we have more time for leisure than we did before. And this is because of modern conveniences like take out and our washing machine. So we've never had more leisure than before, and we've never felt so stressed. So what's going on?

Well, as it turns out, one thing that, at an individual and a societal level, that's changed is obviously our relationship with our technology. So even though we have more leisure than we did before, our leisure has become what I and other researchers call time confetti. Our technology distracts our leisure time. So instead of fully enjoying that time at the beach or that meal with our spouse or with our friend, we're constantly being pulled out of the present and into our phones and reminded of all the things we could or should be doing. And that creates a lot of stress and makes us feel out of control in our lives. So our technology's one of the time traps that I research and talk about that makes us feel time poor.

And another really important more societal factor that makes us time poor is a sense that the ideal worker norms have changed quite a lot. And so technology... This is known as the autonomy paradox... Technology was supposed to free us from the office. And instead, we

are bringing the office everywhere we go. And now we define work quality more by how quickly you respond, as opposed to the quality of output, because knowledge work, it's harder to define on an everyday basis who's doing high quality work. It's not like most of us or many of us are not making widgets in a factory, so there's less objective measures of productivity and success. Or if the time horizon for those outcomes is a lot longer now with knowledge work being more common. And so managers and even ourselves, we've internalized this, that quick responses, constantly being connected and replying at all hours of the day and night is a signal of commitment and quality. And this creates the autonomy paradox, which is that our technology, which was supposed to free us from 9:00 to 5:00 means that we're now working 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

Roger Dooley: My friend Nir Eyal wrote a great book Indistractible, he's been on the show a couple of times one to talk about that. And our devices can really be great things to improve our productivity, but often do the exact opposite, just simply because what you're talking about, always being on. And of course, that's requires personal behavior changes to use them in a good way and not let them prove to be a time sucks.

You introduce... We've talked about time and happiness, but you also introduce the element of money in your book, and how does money relate to... we've all heard that money can't buy happiness, but money and time and I guess, to some degree, happiness are inextricably related. And you've even got a sort of evaluation method for time. Explain all that.

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Ashley Whillans: So time can equal money, but money can also buy us happier time. And so my whole dissertation research was really navigating this trade off that we're often making between time and money. When we are thinking about these resources, we often think about them in isolation. We think about how much time do I have, and we think about how much money do I have, but often decisions about money influenced the way we spend our time and vice versa. This happens on a daily basis and overall, in the course of our lives. Each day, how much time you spend researching the best deal for the latest product might save you a couple of dollars, but eat hours of quality time that you don't even realize. And so you're actually making a time/money trade off in this case.

When we were pre pandemic and traveling quite a lot, we'd often be making trade-offs regarding our commutes. We'd be making decisions about taking an indirect flight versus a direct flight. Indirect flight will save you money. Direct flight will take more money but save you a lot of time and a few terrible hours stuck in a security lineup. And even where we live dramatically influences how long it takes to run daily errands. So we might live further out from civilization to try to save some money and buy a bigger house, but then it takes us so much more commuting time to run our errands, to get to our place of employment, to get to the airport. And those costs become time costs that accumulate over time.

And of course, the biggest time money trade off is a career as we choose and how much we decide to invest our lives in them. So you might be able to be making a decision to have a higher paying job, but it has no

flexibility or not a lot of paid vacation, maybe no paid vacation. And that is going to inherently limit the amount of free time you have available to us.

And one really interesting thing that I've observed in my data is most people make these decisions, but don't always think about them in terms of time/money trade-offs, but people who are more time affluent or more aware of the fact that when they're making a decision with their money, they're often also making a decision that influences their time. And so if you're the kind of person like me, which I call myself out on in the book, I say I'm more money-focused than time-focused, even though I study time, then you have to be proactive about counteracting this general decision you've made to work a high pressure job by making sure you give up some of your money to save time in other domains of your life, like outsourcing meal preparation or outsourcing cleaning, making sure you're spending some of that money to save yourself more time in the future or in the moment, and doing that by removing the most negative moments of your day.

And so this is really where these time/money trade-offs become very interesting because we often think about the decisions we make with our time and the decisions we make with our money in a vacuum. But they're often interacting with each other to shape our happiness, which I've shown over and over again in my research.

And the accounting for time exercise you were talking about, so one reason we often make suboptimal decisions about time and money... So very concretely,

even the world's wealthiest people that I've studied in my surveys, about only 30% of them say they spend money to outsource disliked tasks to others, even though they can clearly afford it. They're not giving up their hard-earned money to have more and better time. And this question becomes why? Why aren't people outsourcing more? Why aren't the very wealthy or even less wealthy who have some discretionary income among us feel so time stressed, yet don't really see this connection between giving up money to have more free time and greater happiness and time affluence? Why might this be the case?

And one reason is time is very abstract as a concept, and money is very concrete. I know the value of 1000 dollars to me right now. I know that that 1000 dollars is going to be valuable to me next week, in three weeks, in six months, in one year. However, when I'm thinking about half an hour more time, if I get this meal delivery service, I don't really... in two weeks, I don't really know what that half an hour means or is or does. What am I going to do with that time? It seems like a waste of money in the moment, but then when you get to the future, and you're very busy, you wish you would have spent some money to get at some time. But because time is so abstract, it's very hard to make these trade-offs in a well-calibrated way.

And so I created this exercise in the book, which is a little bit cute or whatever, but it's based on rigorous, empirical science, and it helps people make the consequences of their time use decisions more concrete. So this idea is called happiness dollars. And really what it does is it uses

the data collected over many, many years and says, we know the impact of a $10,000 raise is about a 0.5% increase at happiness. And so we can then work out well, what is the happiness increase of a time-related choice? And then put that happiness increase back into dollars, so you can see the financial impact in terms of happiness dollars on your time-related decisions.

So one very concrete example, if you go from being more of a time-focused person to more of a money-focused person, even in the absence of changing your behavior, just shifting your mindset to tell yourself time is more important than money, that produces the happiness equivalent of making about $4000 more of household income per year. Outsourcing, even removing the amount of money that you have to spend to pay someone to do stuff for you that you don't like doing, produces the happiness increase of about $12,000 of household income per year.

Even in the absence of spending any money, spending more time socializing than you normally do, very intentionally, as a time affluence producing strategy, produces the happiness equivalent of up to $20,000 or $30,000 of household income per year. And in the book, I have an Excel spreadsheet that people can fill out to work out how much richer they could get in terms of happiness by making time-related choices. And the whole purpose of this exercise is to help us see very concretely the benefits of making different time use decisions than we're currently making.

Roger Dooley: I assume those numbers vary with the individual's income, so a low-income person might not get as much value from socializing as somebody who's making five times as much.

Ashley Whillans: So it's actually quite the reverse. And … yeah, so it's actually the reverse. So lower income people tend to be more time poor because they might be working multiple jobs or live very far from the office or be really concerned about finances for very good reasons. And so I find in most of my datasets that people on the lower end of the income distribution, because they have further to gain and often experience more stress and time stress, benefit even more from making time-related choices that people more at the top end of the distribution, who are generally a little bit more satisfied and experience more joy, less sadness on an everyday basis.

Roger Dooley: And probably automatically outsourcing quite a bit already.

Ashley Whillans: Yes, exactly.

Roger Dooley: What is the mere urgency effect when you're making decisions?

Ashley Whillans: This is a time trap that I also talk about. And the mere urgency effect is the idea that when you're feeling busy, you often gravitate towards completing activities that are urgent, but not important. So this is the explanation for why your inbox goes to zero, when you have a major project or a major deadline upcoming. And the reason we do it is because we want to feel in control of our time and

schedule. So the more stressed we feel, the more we gravitate toward these low-level unimportant tasks, that if we focus too much on, like making our inbox go to zero, we might be foregoing the opportunity to work on something harder that's going to make us more stressed out, down the line. And so we work on all these small, urgent, unimportant stuff to make ourselves feel better and more in control of our time, potentially at the expense of our longterm time affluence.

Roger Dooley: Yeah, that's the classic... It's been called the Eisenhower Matrix and Stephen Covey's Matrix, the urgent versus important quadrants. And yeah, it's so intuitive, it seems like to just clear out a whole bunch of those little urgent things first, before you settle down to work on that big project. The only problem is, I can tell you from personal experience, is that the next day there's a bunch of other little urgent ones to take care of. And if you have not put that project as your priority in your schedule and not worrying about the other stuff, it'll get pushed to the next day, to the next day, and then you wake up and it's three months later.

Ashley Whillans: Exactly. And so this is why we advocate for something that our research supports, which is this idea of proactive time, which other people called time boxing, which happens in two steps. So first, you put a half an hour block in your calendar at the beginning of the week, a planning meeting with yourself, if you will, and you plan what you're going to choose as your most important tasks to get done that week. And then you put time in your schedule, a couple hour blocks where you don't check email, your alerts are off on your phone, and you work on

whatever it is you said at the beginning of the week was the most important, but not necessarily urgent. That new skill you wanted to learn, that data analysis task, the proposal that you were writing, whatever it is. And you treat it like the most important meeting in the world, this meeting with yourself.

And we've done this with executives and salespeople, people who work on interconnected teams, and we show over and over again that putting proactive blocks in one schedule makes people feel more productive, less stressed, less burnt out. And they generally, all of the executives we studied think that it should be an organizational wide practice because it's so helpful to have these focused blocks.

Roger Dooley: Well, not only that, if you're in an organization that uses scheduling software, it also makes those times off limits for other people who want to take up your time. The classic Covey illustration of that by Covey trainers is to have a jar of gravel, and you try and insert a rock into the gravel. And of course, it doesn't go, and it doesn't fit anywhere. But if you put the big rock in first, which is your important task, then all the gravel, the unimportant tasks, just flow around it, and it fits in the jar.

Ashley Whillans: Absolutely. I love that.

Roger Dooley: One of the little worksheets you have in the book is one for saying no. Now I think most productivity experts will tell you to say no, but why do we need a worksheet for that? Or what's that helping people focus on?

Ashley Whillans: Yeah. So as a behavioral scientist, you want to create implementation intentions or a roadmap, a specific who, what, where, when, why, and how you're going to do something before you get faced with the situation in everyday life. So again, none of the strategies I'm talking about are things we don't already know, but the magic is actually doing it when the time comes. And so the worksheet asks people to create a default response. How many conferences are you going to attend, how many talks are you going to give, and write down a rule for yourself. And then most importantly, it asks you, how are you going to say no, specifically to which person.

And our research that's currently under review right now shows that there are better and worse ways to say no. So you might think that saying no because you don't have enough time is the best way to go about saying, no, I can't do something. But time signals something you care about personally. So we all have 24 hours in a day. So when I don't have time for something, it signals that I don't want to do whatever it is you're asking-

Roger Dooley: Whatever you want me to do as an important enough for you to not do something else. So, yeah.

Ashley Whillans: Yeah. So we talk about energy excuses, externally related excuses, "Oh, I'm already committed to this other thing," or providing no excuse at all, as opposed to saying you're too busy. So the one thing our worksheet really does is it forces you to practice how exactly you're going to say no, so you don't get into a situation and then want to say no and not because you don't have that canned response prepared for that specific decision.

Roger Dooley: Yeah. That actually makes a lot of sense because if you prepare yourself to say no in a good way that won't offend the person, you're more likely to do that. And I think that probably all of us end up saying yes to too much stuff, because today it's so easy to ask people to do stuff. Just that little email that you can go to a distribution list, ask five people to do something for you or 20 or 100. And it's really incumbent on us. I'm getting better at saying no, but still have a ways to go on that, I think.

Ashley Whillans: And I think virtual, to your point at the beginning of the intro, the show intro, it is actually harder to say no in virtual. What else are we doing? So it's actually become more of a difficult issue for people. They're taking more meetings. The workday's being extended quite a lot. And I think it's in part because every conversation has to be a meeting, but it's also because I think we're more reticent to say no. And we feel more worried about saying no in virtual, since virtual barriers are quite low to engagement. And so I think this is a nice moment to reflect on our personal values, to see if the way we're spending. Our time is adding up to the way we want to live our life. And making sure we build in some barriers, so we can protect our time in this virtual environment, which can lower boundaries and barriers between people, which is great, but also means a lot of us are feeling more burnt out right now, not less.

Roger Dooley: Yeah. What other advice do you have for working virtually? Everybody was working virtually for a while, it seemed, that could possibly work virtually. Now, some folks are trickling back in offices, others are making the commitment to long-term virtual work, and they're actually

relocating to the suburbs or even someplace out in the woods that has internet. What other advice do you have to deal with those time and happiness issues?

Ashley Whillans: I think virtual work is really interesting. I've been doing a lot of research during this forced experiment with everyone working from home. And as I've already alluded to, one thing that goes completely missing in the virtual environment are breaks, barriers, and boundaries. We used to have our commute, and although I harp on the commute in the book and say it's some of the most negative moments in our day, it also can have some benefits. The commute provides us with an opportunity to switch from our personal roles to our professional roles, and then transition back. We use our commute to plan our day, to think about our most important meetings and how we're going to get through them. And in the absence of having a commute, many people are rolling out of bed and headed into their first meeting without having this proper transition into an out of the workday.

And one thing my colleagues and I are recommending is to build in a commute for yourself. So put the first hour block in the morning as a walk around the block, some family time, a hobby, something that gives you the opportunity to transition from personal to work. And then at the end of the day, come with up with an end of day work ritual for yourself that's enjoyable, that you can look forward to. Maybe it's listening to your favorite podcasts. Again, maybe it's exercise, reaching out to a friend, and having this be a ritual that helps you signal to yourself that the workday is done and really put the work away.

We've also heard a lot of the consultants that we've been doing a research project on will have rituals around where they work. So once they close the door to their spare room office, that's it for the day. So they have this mental transition in and out of work, and that's really important.

I would say also one thing that goes missing in the virtual environment is water cooler conversation, informal interaction. We're tending to schedule a lot of very long social meetings with each other, which is actually really exhausting and contributing to burnout. Hour long Zoom calls are really adding up and taking a toll on people, especially if they're absent of an agenda. People are feeling really taxed by these. So instead of having these hour long let's catch up conversations, leave gaps in between meetings so that you can just kind of jump on the phone and chat with a colleague about something that was interesting you heard in a meeting, or leave time for these informal social interactions via text, because those can be just as good for creativity, productivity, and happiness as longer meetings. And they're much less likely to lead to burnout or additional stress for employees.

Roger Dooley: Great. Well, I think that advice might be a good place to wrap up. Let me remind everyone that we are speaking with Ashley Whillans, author of Time Smart. Ashley, how can people find you and your ideas? We'll certainly link to the book at various locations in our show notes, but how can people interact with you?

Ashley Whillans: You can reach out to me on Twitter, Ashley Whillans at Twitter or on LinkedIn. I'm quite find-able and would love

to hear from you on how you're being time smart while working from home or going back to the office.

Roger Dooley: Well, that's great. And we will have a link to Ashley's Twitter profile, any other resources we mentioned, and both audio, video, and actually, a third text version of our on the show notes page at rogerdooley.com/podcast. Ashley, thanks for being on the show.

Ashley Whillans: Thanks so much for having me.

Thank you for tuning into this episode of Brainfluence. To find more episodes like this one, and to access all of Roger's online writing and resources, the best starting point is RogerDooley.com.

And remember, Roger's new book, *Friction*, is now available at Amazon, Barnes and Noble, and book sellers everywhere. Bestselling author Dan Pink calls it, "An important read," and Wharton Professor Dr. Joana Berger said, "You'll understand Friction's power and how to harness it."

For more information or for links to Amazon and other sellers, go to RogerDooley.com/Friction.