

Transcription: EP 329 - Why Joy is the Exact Opposite of Toxic Positivity with Tanmeet Sethi

Tanmeet: Joy is very different. Joy is an embodied experience. Joy draws on the same deep well as our pain. Happiness is, by definition, binary, and if we're happy, we're not in pain, we're happy. Joy can live right next to pain, and actually gets bigger the more we meet our pain.

Dr. Taz: Hi everyone, and welcome to "Super Woman Wellness." I'm Dr. Taz. I've made it my mission throughout my career in integrative medicine to support women in restoring their health, using a blend of Eastern medical wisdom with modern science. In this show, I will guide you through different practices, to find your power type and fully embody the healthiest and most passionate version of you. I'm here for you, and I can't wait to get started. This is a Soulfire production.

Welcome back everyone. Welcome back to another episode of "Super Woman Wellness," where I am determined to bring us all back to our super-powered self. I couldn't be happier about this next guest. I actually went to school with her. We did the fellowship in integrative medicine together 15 years ago. Good grief, I think I was pregnant for both years of that fellowship. That's why my kids are 15 months apart. I don't think I've talked to her since. I can't wait to reconnect with her, and introduce her to all of you.

Guys, please welcome Tanmeet Sethi. She is a physician, an MD. She's a board-certified integrative family medicine physician, and a clinical associate professor at the University of Washington School of Medicine. She spent the last 25 years on the front lines practicing primary care, working on global trauma and community activism. She has devoted her career to caring for the most vulnerable, and teaching our fellow physicians how to care for these communities in the most humane and skillful way possible. She's a speaker and TEDx talker, and has offered a radical way to practice gratitude. She lives in Seattle with her family, and I'm so happy to see you again. How are you?

Tanmeet: Oh my gosh, I'm thrilled to be talking to you. It's been way too long.

Dr. Taz: It's too long.

Tanmeet: This is so exciting. I also think it's just a monumental moment to note that two South Asian women in medicine really trying to blaze trails that were not shown to us. I just want to honor that right now. It just came to me, and I think that's a big deal.

Dr. Taz: I think it's huge, because we're raised typically in a very traditional, conservative way, and not really given, I think, a lot of space to flex our minds, or be creative,

or go off a beaten path, and I think you and I both did that. We're like, "Screw this. We're doing this instead." I agree with you, I couldn't be prouder of what we've both done over the years, and just of our community as well.

I want to learn more about your journey. I want to learn more about what inspired you. I have my own stories of what I've seen in practice, and I talk about it a lot. My practice really is ground zero for a lot of what I speak and write about, and see. I feel like I learn something every single day. It's been 14 years, but I still learn something every single day. I would love to know what your journey has been after we left, and where that has led you. It led you to writing a book. Tell me a little bit about you, fill me in. All of you listening get to literally sit in on two old friends catching up, that's what this is.

Tanmeet: I'm super excited. I have a new book coming out, called "Joy is My Justice," and that comes out May 2nd, with Hachette. It really is the culmination of my life's work. It is really looking at how joy is not a healing destination, or something we have to strive for, or a commodity, but how it's an innate human right, and a liberation practice, and how it may be the truest justice will ever know, especially when we have incurable suffering, or trauma, or oppression that may be plaguing our lives. What I realized is that I really was on the front lines with the most marginalized communities because, I didn't realize this until later, I never really felt safe in my body. I never really felt safe in my life, and really, a lot of racism, and not belonging, and feeling disconnected, and traveling between two cultures, and never knowing where to end up.

There was a way that I think I thought that if I made the world safer, and fought for justice for all of us, that I would feel safer, too. I think it's a pretty plausible, realistic thought.

Dr. Taz: Interesting.

Tanmeet: A lot of work that we do in the exam room, although people come to me for thyroid issues, and all these chronic illnesses, and integrative consultations, what they're really managing is this disconnection, and lack of meaning in their lives, and feeling lost.

Dr. Taz: Very much.

Tanmeet: That was a lot of what I was also doing one-on-one. In my own life, this was when we were in fellowship together, my second child was diagnosed with a fatal illness called Duchenne Muscular Dystrophy.

Dr. Taz: Oh, I didn't know that.

Tanmeet: Yeah, and there was a moment of reckoning. I had fought for justice my whole career, and really had fought on the front lines, and in the courtrooms, and the exam rooms, and now there was this fight that there was no way to win. It was a moment of, "I know I can get through this, but how do I thrive? How do I actually find joy? How do I make that a practice that I keep touching day in, day out?" Really, my professional and personal lives started to come together in that way, and here's where I am. This book felt very potent and urgent for me to write, and yeah, it's been a healing journey.

Dr. Taz: Oh my goodness, I want to learn more about it. You were asking me about the years since fellowship, and what's transpired, and the practice we've created, which is its own beast, bear, place of joy at times. What I learned, that journey for me over the years has been... one thing about running a company, and anyone who's an entrepreneur or businesswoman probably understands this, in the beginning years, it was like, "If I just get to this point/person/benchmark, it's all going to be okay. Everything's going to be okay. It's going to run super smoothly, and I'm going to be happy, and we won't have any more issues." I would stay up all night problem solving issues. My team still makes fun of me to this day, because the kids were little then, so emails would go out at 2:00 and 3:00 in the morning, and they're like, "Oh my God, here we go, 3:00 AM emails," all that other business.

It took a really long time for me to understand, it's been a 14, 15 year journey, probably only in the last five I would say that I understood that joy and happiness is not a destination. It's not, "If I am perfect, if I do X, Y, Z, if I work extra hard, if I make three lists and cross everything off all three of those lists, everything's going to be just fine." It's taken me some maturity and time to understand that there's a fire every day, that nothing works without hiccups, or so smoothly. I am going to ruffle feathers, but being joyful through this journey of doing the work that I love to do is my choice, and I have to tap into that. I'm assuming that's a little bit of what you're talking about. How did you arrive at that, and how do you translate that to others? That seems to be an issue, too. I'll let you take it from there.

Tanmeet: We could do a few different podcasts on that question.

Dr. Taz: No kidding.

Tanmeet: Well, that's really what the book's about. First, I want to touch on something you said, which was about joy and happiness. What I really break down is how I believe, and it's my truth, people can take it or leave it, but I think joy and happiness are actually very different. I will welcome happiness any day of the week, I'm ready for it, but happiness is a cognitive evaluation. It's an attachment

to outcome. It's not a bad thing, but it's dependent, as you said, on, if this gets done, do I get here, do I get that? Then, it can feel really happy. It can feel so good.

Joy is very different. Joy is an embodied experience. Joy draws on the same deep well as our pain. Happiness is, by definition, binary, and if we're happy, we're not in pain, we're happy. Joy can live right next to pain, and actually gets bigger the more we meet our pain. It draws on that same capacity that pain does for meaning and love. There's a way that, when we learn how to step into our body and tap into joy, we understand not only is it not a destination, but it's a way to hold all the hard. There's a real difference between the two for me, and that's what I really break down in the beginning, and then show the practices to really tap into joy.

Dr. Taz: How did you arrive at this, though? You're working with people in the exam room, you're an activist, what are you seeing that brought you to this point?

Tanmeet: Well, it wasn't instantaneous. It's a process. What it really was is this ongoing life process of realizing that life seems really unfair most of the time. Let's face it, from little things like being stuck in traffic to my son's diagnosis, or people getting a cancer diagnosis, or whatever it be, poverty, we could go on and on, it feels really unfair. It can start to feel like the world is against you, that justice can never be had. Really, it was this ongoing process of understanding that the more free, the more liberated and free and safe... I want to underscore that word, because what our nervous system does is tell us we're not safe when we have a pain or a trauma. Recovering that safety in our body, all of that is a liberation practice. That's joy.

I started to realize that actually, I was the only one who could give myself that. That wasn't going to come from the world. In fact, in a way, the older we get, the more it seems like it keeps getting unfair, because things start accumulating. It's really that joy became this understanding for me that nobody had to give it to me, or show it to me. It was my human right to find it. Some of it was in these ways... we're in this world of integrative medicine, "Meditate, think well," all this stuff, and I do all of that. I tried all of that, that wasn't actually getting me fully to joy. I had to figure out how to deepen that into my body, and understand that it wasn't about me thinking positive. I actually don't believe that's all of it, and I don't think you can think yourself positively out of suffering and poverty and oppression. It was about understanding that I don't deserve this pain, none of my patients deserve their pain, but we all deserve to have joy alongside it, and it became this liberation practice.

Dr. Taz: Oh, I love it. I'm getting chills as you're saying that. I'm thinking about the patient, I'm thinking about me. How do we get there? How do we access that? I

think we've all been in that position of, "Okay, I'm going to manifest. I'm going to have a positive mindset. I'm putting affirmations up on the mirror. I'm beautiful, I'm smart. I'm this, I'm that. I have everything I need. I have my gratitude prayers, gratitude journals." How do we undo generations of negative wiring, of past traumas, all that other stuff? How do you undo that comfort zone that the brain wants to go to feel safe, and to feel protected, and to put their guard up, and make sure nothing bad's going to happen? How do we undo all of that?

Tanmeet: That's a whole book.

Dr. Taz: Well, you've got five minutes. I'm just kidding.

Tanmeet: First I want to underscore, I think it's different for everyone. What I do in this book is really show you a roadmap that then you mold to yourself. I don't think that everybody uses the same exact tools, but all of them have one thing in common, which is that they all involve us really stepping into our body more, and out of our mind, really feeling what we feel instead of thinking what we think. Getting into your body means many different things. What happens when we meet our pain in our body and really get in there? I'm going to give you a practical example in a second, because I know it's hard to understand when there's so many ways. What happens is, we actually stimulate neurochemicals. We stimulate our biochemistry and our physiology to tell our fear centers to dampen down, that we're safe, we're okay.

We reengage our prefrontal cortex and actually give ourselves clarity. Our parts of our prefrontal cortex that actually are able to assign meaning to our pain get activated. We actually start empowering our body to translate what's happening in our lives. Now, when you think about that, that's a really powerful thing. It's not about seeing our life differently, it's about our body living into our life differently. One example that I'm just going to think of, there's so many in the book, but something simple, like emotion labeling, which many people have heard of. What happens is, we primarily want to run away from pain. We feel angry, we feel sad, we feel depressed, we want to just move away from it. I did for sure.

Dr. Taz: Yeah.

Tanmeet: Nobody wants to be in pain, so our body tries to protect us. The truth is that actually, the more we suppress the pain, the more we try to say, "I'm not feeling it," or, "I don't want to feel it, I'm okay, I'll be fine," the more we actually activate our sympathetic nervous system and our stress centers. The more we can even do simple things, if you're feeling angry, and it's the middle of your workday, and you can't express all of it, because we can't all just process every emotion every day, all day, you might just note it, "Anger, anger."

What happens when we just note it is a couple of things. I think spiritually, in the big sense, we give it less power. What happens in our brain is it actually dampens our amygdala, our threat center. This anger's not a threat, it's just there. We reengage that prefrontal executive function. If that makes sense, what I'm saying is, there are many tools like this that actually allow us to be in our body with our challenge instead of pushing it away, and allow ourselves in our body to say, "I'm okay in this moment even though I feel angry."

Dr. Taz: Interesting, so just acknowledging how you feel.

Tanmeet: Yeah, exactly.

Dr. Taz: I don't know if you've heard of Abraham Hicks, the emotional scale and all that. They talk a lot too about, we are meant to feel good. It is our right. We're not here to feel badly. Do the things that make you feel good. Again, that's different, like you're saying, for everyone, but leading with feeling, and not leading with thought, is the current theme.

Hi, it's Dr. Taz here. All right, let's be real. We're going to be honest for a second. It's all about the hair, right? At least that's what I was told by mother and my mother-in-law when I was losing my hair rapidly. Look, hair loss is real. It's an epidemic. So many women are suffering from it today, and it can knock out your self-esteem in about five seconds, I've been there, getting dressed with the lights off, not wanting to go out even when I was only in my twenties. Lush Locks is my formula in my product line, the EastWest Way, which really addresses hair loss by merging together eastern and western medicine, true to the EastWest Way philosophy. In Lush Locks, there are methylated B vitamins, magnesium, iron, all of which has been shown to promote healthy hair. The key is that this particular patented formula also contains the Ayurvedic herbs Amla, which have been shown to help regrow hair, improve blood flow to the scalp, and the Chinese herb Fo-Ti, which has been used for centuries in Chinese medicine for hair regeneration and hair regrowth.

By putting all of these together with additional micronutrients, Lush Locks is the one supplement I can't live without. In fact, I would take it with me if I was stranded on an island. It works beautifully to help regenerate and regrow hair, and prevent further hair loss. I encourage all of you to give Lush Locks a try. In fact, just this month, if you go to theeastwestway.com, type in the code SWW30, you'll get 30% off your purchase of Lush Locks. That includes the supplement, along with the shampoo and conditioner that's also a part of my hair loss line.

Look, hair loss is real. It impacts us all. It doesn't have to be that way. Tryout Lush Locks, use your code, and don't forget, if you rate and review any episode of

the podcast and email me at hello@drtaz.com, I'll send you a free bottle of Lush Locks or Boost, you get to choose. Just make sure you email me, and we'll take it from there.

What do you feel like folks could do maybe on a daily basis to tap into feeling? Acknowledging emotions is one, what is another tool that you would potentially recommend?

Tanmeet: One big one is breath, honestly. It's so simple, but breath, as you know very well, and I've heard you talk about just activating your parasympathetic nervous system, and really giving your vagus nerve and your body, your nervous system sends more information to your brain than vice versa, so giving your brain the sense that, "I'm okay, I'm safe." I think there's more to breath than just that. It's saying to yourself, "I can start over any moment." It's saying to yourself, "I'm here to create space for what I am receiving." It's why I tell patients all the time, "Let's take a breath for a moment, to just receive what you just said, so that I can receive it, so that we can just note what's most potent right now for us to take care of." The breath is so simple, but so powerful.

Self-compassion practice, I could go on and on, but these things actually get us back into our body, and acknowledge our humanity, and acknowledge the fact that we are supposed to have challenging emotions. That is not a failing of ourselves, that is not, "We are not tough enough, or strong enough." That is what we are supposed to feel, and when we do feel them, they are potent messengers from our body. We are sad because we love. We are angry because we care, all of that. It's not that you need to note all of those into positive things right away. In fact, I don't believe in that. Noting the challenging things as positive things is another whole level. When I'm really sad, I'm really sad. I cry and I scream, and I'm upset, and I feel like I've been wronged. Now, because I have such a strong joy practice, I also know, I can feel it in my body, but this will expand me into another place that I need to go. Maybe not today, but I'll get there.

Dr. Taz: That's so wise, and so telling. You have a micro picture of the exam room, and personal stories, and stuff like that, but you also have a macro picture. How do you feel like the inability to tap in, and to understand that joy is our right, feeling good is a right, one that we have to claim, how does that play into the mental health crisis, the addiction crisis, homelessness, some of these bigger picture issues that we're facing as a country, and as a civilization today? What's happening there?

Tanmeet: Well, again, another five podcasts.

Dr. Taz: Sorry.

Tanmeet: No, they're such good questions.

Dr. Taz: I love your opinion. I want to know what you have to say.

Tanmeet: One thing that I see in the micro and the macro is that there's a big stigma around the sense that, if you don't feel better yet, there must be something wrong, something you're not doing. You're not moving your body enough, you're not meditating, you're not accepting what you have in abundance. I could go on and on, right?

Dr. Taz: Yeah.

Tanmeet: If we could note that there are real life problems, and that we are all doing our best, but when we actually impose on another person the resilience that we think they need to have rather than understanding that their resilience is getting up every day and doing this dang thing again, then we're imposing a system on them that is also oppressive. Now they're fighting the mental health issues that they have, and they're fighting the oppression of society that tells them they need to be over it.

Dr. Taz: Yeah. How do we help them, though? Whether you're in a family dynamic or you're in a community dynamic, how do you help the person who's struggling? How do you help the person who's angry all the time? How do you help the person who's sad all the time? How do you help the person who is oblivious all the time? How do you tap in? Many of the folks listening on the show were mothers, or we're sisters, or we're wives, or we're cousins. We usually take care of somebody. I can guarantee you every single person listening is taking care of at least five people, probably more.

Tanmeet: Yeah.

Dr. Taz: I've done that arc, too, having teenagers, the 14 and 15 year old, and have been married now for almost 19 years. Again, seeing my journey through all of that, first with the anxiety of youth, "Oh my God, oh my God, oh my God, they're not doing this," just hearing my own buzzing in my head, to having a few fall-outs with each of them on different issues, and being like, "Okay, they have to be in charge of their own destiny. There's only so much I can put my hand down," to now being like, "How do I lead? How do I lead by example? How do I lead not by voice, but by look, or action, or empathy, or compassion?" What is helpful, and what is enabling, especially when you're talking about children? What would you say to all of us out there who are trying to help people who are stuck in an emotional pattern. They can't access joy. How do you help that person move that energy through?

Tanmeet: Yeah, there's a few big points here, I think that I would say. One is that it takes a lot of work for that person, and there's a lot of professionals needed, and so I would not discount that. I don't think anyone of us would be the only one to help anyone who's stuck. I do want to make that sensed for people to understand, that it's good to have a team, and we should all have a team. No one person is going to fix everything for you.

At the same time, what I would say is that we all have people in our lives we love, like you're saying, who are stuck, and we want to be the best support to them possible. I would say to start with this understanding that not only do we want to run away from our pain, but we want to run away from their pain. We want to fix it so fast. We just want it to be okay. Now, I'll take the example you said, just because it was the last one, of being a mother to children.

Dr. Taz: Yeah.

Tanmeet: We just want to make it okay. We don't want them to suffer.

Dr. Taz: Right.

Tanmeet: The truth is though, the more we don't see their suffering, acknowledge it and hold it with them, the more we try to fix it quickly and wrap it up, the more we're saying to them, implicitly and explicitly, "This is a human failing to feel this." The more we can say, "That sounds hard; that sounds really like a struggle; I feel like I can remember times I've struggled like that; I don't know what you're feeling, but I am willing to be in here with it, with you, and to help you in any way I can," instead of, I'm going to give you the opposite, which is that I often get people saying, "At least you don't have this; at least you have two other children;" or, "I can't imagine what you're going through."

It all comes from love, and at the same time, if we all try to imagine a little more each other's pain, not saying we understand it, but, "I'm here to sit with it with you," the more we try to imagine it, that's a bridge to not only the other person, but to our own pain. It becomes, can we change as a society to say that pain is uncomfortable, but I'm here with you in it.

Dr. Taz: I like that. That's a much softer, more empathetic almost approach. "I'm sitting next to you, not trying to be in front of you." I think that's the difference.

Tanmeet: We haven't had this talk, but we've talked about our cultures a lot. We're both South Asian. I'll tell you, in our culture, at least in my family culture, in my community culture, you fix that stuff and you buck up.

Dr. Taz: Oh yeah.

Tanmeet: And you feel better fast.

Dr. Taz: There are no counselors, and therapists, and CBT, and hypnosis, whereas, let's flip it to the community that I'm in currently, most moms are running around trying to fix things. There are multiple counselors. It's the other extreme, right?

Tanmeet: Yes, you're right.

Dr. Taz: While our community came and worked their butts off, and there wasn't really time or space to entertain how you're feeling, feeling was not relevant, basically. That's how we were raised. How you're feeling is completely irrelevant to how you're functioning in the world.

Tanmeet: Yeah.

Dr. Taz: Then we become parents, and so trying to unlearn that, and learn very quickly that how people feel is a big deal. It matters in relationships, and even in your work culture, it really matters. I'll go back to being a businesswoman. It matters with your team. How do they feel?

Tanmeet: Yes.

Dr. Taz: You can sit there and rationalize all you want. "I do this for you, and I do that. I do this." How are they feeling?

Tanmeet: Yes.

Dr. Taz: That's the question we have to keep coming back to over and over again, without trying to fix stuff.

Tanmeet: Exactly.

Dr. Taz: That is the dynamic that most women, I think, struggle with. We feel, and we are trying to feel, but we want to fix.

Tanmeet: Yes.

Dr. Taz: At some point, I think we have to realize that's just not our responsibility.

Tanmeet: We can't do it all. Nobody can. Another nuance of that, that I've been learning as a mother over the last couple of decades, not only can I not fix everything for them, but I also have to show them that I don't fix all my stuff so fast either.

Dr. Taz: Ooh, that's good one.

Tanmeet: I tell them when I'm sad, I tell them when something's hard. It's a fine line. I don't want them to have to take care of me, but I also show them that I'm only human.

If they never see me have a hard time, then how would they feel comfortable telling me they're having a hard time?

Dr. Taz: Right.

Tanmeet: I really try to balance that.

Dr. Taz: Yeah, I love that. Oh my gosh, so much great advice. Any other tools or tips in your book? Tell us about the book. When's the book coming out? Is it already out?

Tanmeet: It comes out May 2nd. You can pre-order it on my website, or on my social media pages. Really, what I hope people will get from the book, in the biggest way, I feel like a joy activist. I'm so evangelical about it.

Dr. Taz: I love it.

Tanmeet: Joy is really a way to hold the pain, and you don't have to wait for the pain to be resolved. You don't have to wait for your trauma to be healed. Actually, the way to heal, and the way to hold everything is to understand that you have a right to feel expansive and joyful even in the small moments. Whether that's in a breath, a walk in nature, whether it's a nurturing hand, whether it's a piece of gratitude, whatever it is for you is to understand that that practice is available to you always.

Dr. Taz: I love that, and I think it's so important for everyone to remember that. I think there's something about the formula of success that says it has to be painful to be successful, and if we're not feeling pain, or uncomfortable, or sweating, or whatever it is, then we're not accomplishing. I think that's what's been handed down, especially to us, probably to many people in particular, but I think that's the wiring that has to be undone.

Tanmeet: Yes, I agree.

Dr. Taz: Oh my goodness, this is so great. How do people find you? Give us your website.

Tanmeet: Everything is my full name, Tanmeet Sethi MD. My URL is tanmeetsethimd.com. All my social handles are Thanmeet Sethi MD, so they can find me there.

Dr. Taz: Perfect. I'm going to spell it for you guys, just to make sure.

Tanmeet: I figured you would.

Dr. Taz: It's T-A-N-M-E-E-T, S-E-T-H-I MD.

Tanmeet: Yes.

Dr. Taz: Oh my gosh, so good to see you again. I'm sending you a big hug over the airways here.

Tanmeet: Thank you, same.

Dr. Taz: I hope to see you in person soon. For everyone else watching and listening to us, I hope you enjoyed this episode of "Super Woman Wellness," and are charge to you is to tap into your joy. I will see you guys next time.