

Wynne Leon (00:01)
Hi Mike!

Mike Rucker, PhD (00:02)
Hi! My gosh, did I just go through puberty?

Wynne Leon (00:06)
So reading your book, *The Fun Habit*, and your newsletter, and your LinkedIn posts, I was so struck by how you see life and fun systematically. And you see the big picture and that makes you so effective at finding the sticking point.

Can you tell us your story and how your work as an organizational psychologist, an entrepreneur, and author comes together to help build systems and lives?

Mike Rucker, PhD (00:38)
Yeah. So the reason that I approached that, the research in that way is initially I was really drawn to positive psychology right when it came out, at the turn of the millennium, I was just through serendipity kind of invited to be a part of the initial cohort that looked at that. And so I've always been kind of fascinated at, you know, how we can approach betterment because that was the promise of positive psychology for folks that don't know the history.

You know, we've had tools for betterment like gratitude and mindfulness, you know, that are most people will be aware of, but at least from a clinical standpoint, we had all up until that point really only used it to treat folks that had a deficit, you know, poor mental hygiene, but they can be used by anyone. Right. And so, it was neat. know, during that time we were bringing them forth.

Cheek Set Me High's flow was like kind of the big one, you know, teaching everyone about that. And then we really started to measure happiness in a quantitative way because we wanted to figure out like why are some countries happier than the other, you know. But it slowly but surely kind of got weird, especially by like 2010 where we were now creating interventions to try and get people from a happiness score. We call it subjective well-being.

You know, like if you're at an eight, how do we get to you to a nine? And four consequences came out of that. mainly one, you should never quantify happiness because happiness is something ephemeral, right? And, two, like happiness is already problematic when you start to rank it, you know, we know that comparison is one of the traps that keeps us on what we colorfully call the hedonic treadmill, but really just, you know, the idea that

If we're always kind of looking at how we fit against someone else, we can't bring that inward and figure out what it is that lights us up. And due to some personal circumstances, I talk about it in the book, I lost my younger brother and after being a runner for quite some time, I had an injury that sort of changed that part of my identity.

was becoming unhappy, but I was like, well, there are all these like trite little things that, I know will make me a happier person. And they started to fail me. Like we now know fail so many folks when you start to idolize happiness or treat it as an outcome and keep trying to chase it paradoxically. it's a pretty straight path to being really unhappy. In fact, we know it can lead to, you know,

clinical disposition if it's overemphasized. So at that point I was like, okay, well, you can't completely throw everything out, right? And there's got to be something to it. And so I started digging in like what it does actually work and what doesn't. And, you know, at the most basic level, it's really just combining mindfulness with enjoying what you do, like mindfully understanding

What lights you up in context to your relationship with either that activity or, the ones around you, or sometimes, you know, the environment, something like, finding the awe and wonder in nature. And so the system part comes is that, you know, we have 160 hours in a week. And if we're deliberate, we can index that in once we understand what it is we like. especially once we really figure out what it is we like, right. That we want to bring in.

Wynne Leon (03:53)
Mm-hmm.

Mike Rucker, PhD (04:10)
because, another thing that got complicated, especially over the last 10 years is that a lot of folks and I'm sure I'm, I'm one of the guilty here. sometimes do things in a performative way because we want to post them or, you know, we're getting validation from outside sources where we're doing things that aren't necessarily in alignment with what.

Wynne Leon (04:27)
Mm-hmm.

Mike Rucker, PhD (04:34)
brings us joy, but we're doing it because of either social pressure or at the most extreme because somehow we really began to want that dopamine hit of getting an external validation through likes or comments and things of that nature. You especially see that with younger folks But adults certainly aren't immune to it.

Like understanding it's a multi-step process, but understanding one, what is it that I really want to do? So creating that space kind of pausing, the things that I'm doing things that are lighting me up? and then two, once I do discover, okay, these are the things that I want, these are all just, you know, hypotheticals, but like, you know, my, I want to spend more time with my favorite person. Or if I'm, an introvert,

with my favorite hobby or whatever it is, having the space to at least have some leisure time within your week becomes important. So the system is how do you bring that in?

Wynne Leon (05:36)

Right, and I love what you just said there, because you do this throughout your book where you talk about, it's not just for extroverts. It's for whatever your, you know, particular flavor is. Introvert, extrovert, socially awkward, whatever it is, you have suggestions throughout for, what might work.

Mike Rucker, PhD (05:57)

Yeah, I think that's what is unfortunate, like, especially after the book came out where I would be working with individuals and they'd be like, I guess I'm just not a fun person. I was like, why do you think that? And they're like, well, you know, I'm not going to concerts. I'm not going to these big parties like my friends do. if we define fun, right? Cause it's always important, you know, especially folks that don't know the work as just finding enjoyment in what you do. Then if you're sitting by the pool, reading a good book and that lights you up.

That's your level of renewal. And that's how you're having fun. As long as you're doing that, you are a fun person. know? And so that reframe, but unfortunately, especially because of marketing, right? And the way we've been socially conditioned. And this is more prevalent, in the West than it is East. But this idea that fun one is something that you do after, but also that it always has to be a high arousal, right? Like if you're not on the beach.

Wynne Leon (06:34)

Right.

Mike Rucker, PhD (06:54)

you know, enjoying a cocktail and clicking your heels up, you know, so that you can post it, then you're not having fun. That's just, not true. And so, as you know, I stood on the shoulders of Jeanne Tsai She's a Stanford researcher, but her work's been replicated. Like, how do we reframe things like calm and serenity, in a way that's still enjoyable. Cause sometimes maybe you want to do those things.

Not for enjoyment. there's been, this renewal on down regulating your central nervous system for a whole host of reasons. And so that might be a practice, right? You don't want to make fun. It's, know, again, I'm always careful to say it's not about building this life of whimsy, but there are a lot of things you can do. As you know, I call it activity bundling where you can accomplish both if you get creative. And so again, like creating that space and being mindful of how.

Wynne Leon (07:33)

Mm-hmm.

Mike Rucker, PhD (07:45)

What is your entry point here? Why are you doing it? Is it from the frame of I get to do this because I'm excited about it rather than I have to do it? All of those things matter.

Wynne Leon (07:56)

Yeah, yeah. And I love the definition that you pulled out there. know, fun is finding enjoyment in what you do. I mean, that's a great way to sort of boil it down. it sort of dovetails so nicely with your call to action, which is it's time for all of us to jump back into the daring adventure and reclaim our fun, not just for ourselves, but as a restorative path for our loved ones and as you'll discover for our society as well.

So can you say more about how fun is restorative?

Mike Rucker, PhD (08:29)

Yeah. So that was really framed for the sandwich generation that so many of us find ourselves in. Right. And so for folks that don't know that term for the first time in any modern era, we're having kids later in life, but our, and fortunately our parents are living longer. So it used to be that we would get help with regards to child rearing from our parents, right. Which would give us a little bit of time back in our schedule, but now we're the most time poor.

Wynne Leon (08:36)

Mm-hmm.

Mike Rucker, PhD (08:59)

society there is. And the reason that's important is that when we don't have much time in our schedule, our lives become habitualized. And once this routine sets in, we tend to see time pass us by because we're not dilating it with novel experiences. And so thinking about fun in the context of creating a little bit of variety in your schedule so that you can slow things down, so that you can start to encode

memories with either friends or things that you like so that life is worth living, becomes important for all the reasons, right? Again, we break that habituated routine that kind of always lends itself to making you feel like life is passing you by. But then through this idea of social contagion, once we start to feel that and we want to share it with our loved ones, then everything just starts to get better.

Like once you're able to build that, then like you want to invite your partner in, right? Or you want to invite your friends in. And so then they start to see like, Oh, this happens. And it's really about a recalibration. think oftentimes when these conversations go off the rails, it's always like, so my whole life is supposed to be fun. No, I meant, you know, there's a time and place for everything. But the argument is, is that we know.

that folks aren't enjoying any of their leisure time, right? In fact, in North America, the stats are really alarming. often, you know, I'm careful here because then folks are gonna see just talking about like vacations and things, but I think it's important to understand that with regards to access to just time outside of work, we're the second worst in the developed world with regards to giving access to that. We give on average 10 days off.

for one year's worth of work. Micronesia, think is the one below us at nine days off. But we don't have control over that, right? So that's interesting, but the thing I find more profound is that even though we have this meager access to that, in any given year, only half of us even take one day off for ourselves. Like that's how little we prioritize.

you know, creating space for doing things outside of what we feel dutiful. So bringing it back in, is this important? One of the biggest, of ah-has and it was really neat because it was a piece of research that I didn't have initially in the original manuscript, but it just brought everything together. is this idea of the hedonic flexibility principle. This would be the last science lesson because I don't want anyone to stop listening to the podcast.

Wynne Leon (11:39)

No,

tell us!

Mike Rucker, PhD (11:42)

If anything,

go back to the beginning when I was going through puberty. But it's this really good piece of research out of Stanford and really big sample size, 28,000 participants. And there were other researchers, Oxford was involved and one other university, but they went and the big question for the research was, right, this idea and philosophy.

Are we always trying to either guide ourselves towards pleasure or trying to escape pain? And so it should be no surprise that one of the questions that was answered is that if you're constantly not enjoying yourself, you actually do find poor ways to escape that pain, right? And so they found folks that were burnt out or primarily picking, poor ways to escape this, you know, that, that sense of unease, things like.

you know, drinking too much or just doing a lot of things that weren't necessarily restorative, right? It was really more of a way to just displace that feeling that you had to a numb it. But the surprising finding was that the folks that did have a ample amount of fun things to do, you know, were in pro-social relationships, had hobbies outside of work, were actually the ones that sought out

challenge after that because when your fun cup is full, what they found, right, is that you don't need more fun. You're like, I'm living a balanced life. And so that's when growth can

start to happen. And so once you are able to kind of recalibrate, you quickly find yourself in this upward spiral. It's not like, my goodness, you know, I went to a cool, you know, rock concert. Now I'm go to Burning Man every other weekend. You know, it's that.

Wynne Leon (13:18)

Mm-hmm.

Yeah. Right.

Mike Rucker, PhD (13:36)

~ my life is enjoyable. Like what else could I do to start, creating an expansive environment for me and the folks around. then, adjacent to that, anyone in knowledge work, I thought this was really cool too, was that they also benefit because what we found is that if you are in that burnt out state, right? Like if you finding yourself in sort of the negative spiral, that it's really hard to think in a non-linear fashion.

In fact, you go to work and you really just rely on what you already know. So you're not trying to create a problem solve. ~ you're really just trying to get, from point A to point B. And oftentimes you're a lot less productive, right? And what does that mean? Especially if you're just trying to keep up that you're working harder, right? And so you're even crowding out more time for leisure. And so when you think about it in that context, like it's not just about, you know, folks that want to live a more joyful life.

really about if you're not living a joyful life, even if your motivation is to be the best version of yourself, you're not creating an environment for that to happen because we all need renewal. And then you tack on that you're probably affecting the folks around you too, because if you're in the home burnt out, right, everyone picks up on that. so.

Wynne Leon (14:46)

Great.

Yeah.

Yeah. And I love what you're talking about there, which is you're building more capacity when you're in that upward spiral. and, and, and you're, and in your book, you apply it to so many different areas, whether it's work and parenting. mean, and you just did that again with what you mentioned there, but agency is such a

consistent theme throughout your book, you know, in managing our time and parenting and work and tackling hard things. And I love the energy I got just in reading your book because it, it just helped me think of the ways that I could get past roadblocks. one of the stories, and maybe you could tell it to, I love that you and your wife didn't like bath time with your kids and you had such a creative way to solve that problem. So I'd love for you to tell us the story and explain why agency is so

Mike Rucker, PhD (15:22)

Thank

Thanks

Wynne Leon (15:40)

important.

Mike Rucker, PhD (15:41)

Well, thanks for liking that story, because I will tell you, and this hasn't affected me in a negative way, so no one needs to pity me, but I do find that the negative reviews for the book on Goodreads, the two primary things are folks that hate that story. They're like, how dare, and I think it's just because

Wynne Leon (15:46)

Heh.

really?

Mike Rucker, PhD (16:09)

But it's interesting in context that it really highlights that what's fun for one person is not fun for another. so I think, you again, it doesn't, I get it. But I think it's because these people love, bath time so much with their kids. The thought of me not liking it is like, you know, I don't like this guy because we don't have the same taste. So that's fine. The other one that folks, you know,

Wynne Leon (16:17)

Mm-hmm.

Yeah.

Mm-hmm.

Yeah.

Great.

Mike Rucker, PhD (16:35)

seemed to not like is the practical joke we played on our friends about. So I just find it funny, you know, and maybe that's why they picked up the book because, you know, they, they want to get closer to trying to find a way to enjoy silly things like that, you know, but I just wasn't enough to convince them. So anyway, so that's, yeah, I'm an agency is a big part of, I will for a hundred percent. Yeah.

Wynne Leon (16:39)

Yeah. ~

Yeah.

Okay, tell the story about that. Tell the backstory. Okay. Alright. Okay.

Mike Rucker, PhD (17:03)

But I do want to acknowledge that, you know, that comes from social determination theory. Like we just know that if you feel like you're co-creating something or creating it for that matter, you know, we just know it's more enjoyable. going to give one quick story first that I like, just to highlight that, from a work concept. that is that this idea that if you're a manager or a leader,

And you think taking out your subordinate to lunch is enjoyable They see it as work. Right? And so we know that when you look at This study has been replicated a few times that the boss is always confused like well I you know just took them out for a fun lunch and the subordinate I meant Without context is a hundred percent of the time gonna think it's a work and had no fun at all It was actually an extension of work

and then made the second half of the day more miserable. And so I say that to just show how agency shows up everywhere. With regards to the bath time story, for whatever reason, our kids found a way to push our buttons during that time. They just would splash and never wanna get in and then never wanna get out. And we never found a way to make it enjoyable. We tried. ~

Wynne Leon (18:21)

Yes.

Mm-hmm.

Mike Rucker, PhD (18:25)

And I, it was through the structure of a loving relationship, it was always, kind of funny, but like, you know, after a while the joke got old and we would both always try and delay if it was our night, like as long as we could. And yeah.

Wynne Leon (18:40)

Right. Which

doesn't help because you get a little more tired. Like that's the other thing about bath time. It doesn't happen at the beginning of the day when you're fresh of fun ideas, right? Yeah.

Mike Rucker, PhD (18:45)

Yeah. ~

Yeah. And it's funny because

even now that they can both bathe themselves, like that still hasn't changed. they both are in sports, so they, you know, even more reasons that they need hygiene, but like they'll wait till the very last second. My son, especially because, he's trying to negotiate bedtime every night. And so he uses the shower as a way to, I still need to take my shower. Like he's just, he, I'm gonna use a masterful at it, but.

Wynne Leon (19:03)

Yeah.

Yes.

you

Mike Rucker, PhD (19:19)

when they were kids, yeah, I mean, it just became a routine that my wife and I didn't enjoy. And, we had some affluent friends that, had full-time nannies. And so we knew that was part of what they could afford. certainly couldn't. but just cause of social norms, we're like, ah, it'd be really weird to just bring in a babysitter to do it. And then we just got over ourselves. We're like, how is that different? It's just a fractional nanny.

Wynne Leon (19:40)

Yeah

Mike Rucker, PhD (19:45)

You know, it's probably just because you're labeling them as a babysitter. And so we got over ourselves and essentially hired a babysitter to help do that chore. And her name was Caitlin. She's amazing. Ended up going to her college graduation, she became a family friend and the kids loved her. I think just because like now is a new context, you know, and not their parents doing it. They had so much fun. know, she enjoyed it again, you know, so much so that

Wynne Leon (19:45)

Mm-hmm.

Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm.

Mike Rucker, PhD (20:14)

she became part of the family. But not only that, Anna and I got our time back. like a lot of busy parents with young kids. We didn't have one or two hours of the week to actually

have us time. And once we, you know, were able to create that environment for ourselves, we then started having dinner, you know, two to three times a week. And it was amazing. Like the leverage that had on our relationship, one,

kind of co-creating this cool ability to create space for us, but then just to reconnect, you just those two or three hours that have conversations that weren't around household management or the things that we had to do, yeah, a hundred percent. And then talk about an upward spiral, right? And I think it is a great example of that. So for all the things, you know,

Wynne Leon (20:47)
Mm-hmm.

who's going to do the bath tonight. Right?

Mike Rucker, PhD (21:05)
We took away something that we didn't enjoy that certainly wasn't fun for all four of us. We replaced it with something that was fun for all four of us. But then we also created the space to do something that was even more enjoyable that led to a better relationship between my wife and I. And then we created the upward spiral because then when it was our turn with the kids, because we had changed the way that bathtime worked, was more fun for us when we had it. We took some cues from Caitlin on what was working.

And then also I think the kids just now learned a different behavior, right? I mean, they weren't set in their ways anymore and kind of understood the routine in a way where if we hadn't had that pattern interrupt would have never happened. so.

Wynne Leon (21:48)
Right.

Pattern interrupt is such a good, such a good word for it. mean, you know, it's just, you just found a way to change the script and reframe it and, and it's so creative. You know, I love it. It's, know, they, and, as you said, you made it more fun for all four of you. What a win. Yeah.

Mike Rucker, PhD (21:58)
You

And how easy, right? think

the bigger takeaway from that is like, you can do this with anything. And we've seen it so many times. I mean, I get that there's, you know, it comes from a platform of privilege to say you can outsource something, but there's so many other creative ways, to be able to

trade time with neighbors or, know, ~ one of the coolest things I think is just deciding to quit doing something.

You know, Laura Vanderkam does some work in this area too, more on time management, like, why have you, why is it, this is her idea, but like, why is it that you need your house clean every day? Like can't your house be messy, you know, four out of the seven days. And you know, all of sudden now you have a couple hours back and guess what? You're still going to have to clean it just as much. Right. And so.

Wynne Leon (22:56)

Mm-hmm.

Mike Rucker, PhD (23:04)

That's just another example of things that if we don't take a step back and evaluate critically, even though they're grinding us down slowly day after day, you know, because again, it is habituated and we're like, I don't like it, but I have to do it. Do you have to do it? Yeah.

Wynne Leon (23:20)

Right,

right, right. there's that creativity and that just, you know, bigger picture. mean, that's what's so fun about your book is that bigger picture. And one of the things that you really resonated with me is this quote from you, which is, happiness is a state of mind, but fun is something you can do.

And you weave it into the ups and downs of life. mean, you write early on, you know, this is not an every day is a good day kind of book. I mean, you talk about your brother dying and your hip surgery and the crisis of positive psychology failing you. mean, those are big things. You know, it's, but out of that came this act of being intentional.

You know, making those choices, changing those habituated routines, doing some planning, and then savoring it. Can you talk about savoring it and the Fun File and how to apply those ideas?

Mike Rucker, PhD (24:25)

I think so there's a lot to unpack there, right? I think you brought up four different things that I'll, ~ you scare me back in if I do. No, I love it. When I interview people, get accused of, someone accused me of asking Stanford questions. I love that. I don't know what that meant, like, know, four-parters. So, you know, I'm getting a taste of my own medicine, but. ~

Wynne Leon (24:28)

Yes. Sorry, that was the interviewer problem of packing too many questions in.

Mike Rucker, PhD (24:55)

So to begin with, with regards to juxtaposing fun and happiness, I think what we know is that, you know, and again, these are just terms, right? But the way that generally we look at them in the English language is that happiness is in the rear view mirror, right? It requires us to be reflective. It tends to be on a continuum the way that we've defined it, right? And so, am I happy is...

this construct that we make of, you know, some sort of timeline and then comparing it to, you know, where we rank within our social structure. And that's why it's changing all the time. we often talk about these lottery studies. That's why someone can have this huge windfall and then a year later, you know, just be right back where they left it. And that's because it is an evaluative kind of concept. and fun, it's quite

Wynne Leon (25:37)

Mm-hmm.

Mike Rucker, PhD (25:47)

different in the sense that yes, it's something that we can do and it is meant to come and go. But if you understand that you have the agency to implement it, essentially every week, it means you always have something to look forward to. Even if you're in a time, you you mentioned that I lost my brother during that period. after I kind of realized that I did need to mourn because I tried to circumvent.

that. I was like, you know, my brother wouldn't want me to be sad. Um, it doesn't matter. My brain wanted me to be sad. Right. And the fact that I was trying to, you know, compartmentalize and push that down rather than go through it is part of the reason, you know, that I was getting less and less happy. but anyone facing any sort of change or, something where happiness is an appropriate emotional response can still create

this affect of joy, you know, by connecting with the things that they like, whether that's, you know, hanging out with a best friend or, you know, just getting back into, something that, that you really liked. Right. And again, you know, some of the hesitant there is the complexity of writing a book like the fun habit is that that is going to be unique to everyone. Right. Again, it's the only reason I brought up the reviews because I think it's cute, you know, that like, you know, that the disconnect of like,

Wynne Leon (27:04)

Yeah, right.

Mike Rucker, PhD (27:08)

having to have this definition can really get in the way. And so you get to decide, right? You know, some people are really tactile. So it could just be being in the garden. And even

though that doesn't feel like it's bringing pleasure into your life, it really is a joyful activity because it's something that you, you know, is bringing you out of, you know, that malaise that you're in. so, you know, whatever that looks like for you, figuring out that balance, because especially if it's not in your schedule at all,

you need to come back to it, right? So oftentimes when we find ourselves in midlife, it's been absent for so long that we need to figure out what it is that we do like, right? Because maybe we've been going to gym meets for so long, you know, for our littles that we found a way to create friendships, you know, with the other parents. But that might not be the things that

truly light us up, right? It's still through this lens of these are the things I need to do to get through my week. And so what are just a few things that you can create in your schedule? And that's, you know, what you mentioned with the Fun File. I suggest, you know, just whether it's a Fun File or a piece of paper or, you know, a Google doc, like figuring out what are the things that you do want to do in your life that once you do them, you know, you will feel like

Wynne Leon (28:13)

Mm-hmm.

Mike Rucker, PhD (28:36)

that you got to do them and that they, they brought you some joy. And if you are in a situation where you can't even find a few hours for yourself because you know, you're engaging in a level of service, there's still ways to find out how you can co-create those with the folks that you need to serve, right? Whether, that looks like, just having a conversation with those folks and saying, Hey,

Wynne Leon (28:37)

Mm-hmm.

Mike Rucker, PhD (28:59)

I want to do something together with you that we both enjoy and figuring it out that way. And if you're truly stuck and this one was an unlock. don't think it made it into the book, but it is who is your funnest friend and just asking them like, you know, could you tag along? Because, you know, they come with this energy that they already have. And so why not model their behavior and, you know, nine times out of 10.

Folks that are like, I don't even know what to put in my Fun File. Like that's enough to get them unstuck, right? Cause they're like, they're doing these things. I might not like it, but now I get it. and I'll figure out what it is.

Wynne Leon (29:35)

Well, a researcher and psychologist, Alison Gopnik, who I think is from Berkeley, talks about the spotlight brain that adults have versus the lantern brain that the kids have where they see everything around and it's why it takes forever to tie the shoes because they get down on floor and then they see the thing. But she talks about that as one way to get unstuck too, is you just spend some time with some littles.

Mike Rucker, PhD (29:38)
Yeah.

Wynne Leon (29:56)
and see everything, you sort of get out of your lane, right? I mean, and that's, and it sort of goes back to, you know, finding the blessings in our burdens. When we can do that, it gets us unstuck and remembers, and it makes it fun to do some of the things instead of just that we've got to get to school, we've got to get to school mentality.

Mike Rucker, PhD (30:20)
Yeah, you might remember

the only real piece of original research in the book was I had here in North Carolina, I had gone to a bunch of children learning centers. We didn't have many of those. You know, we had the Exploratorium in the Bay Area, but here it's pretty cool. Like in each major city, they have these experiential areas where, you know, kids can build things and, you know, there's obviously lessons and things of that nature. But

Wynne Leon (30:30)
Mm.

Mike Rucker, PhD (30:48)
What I observed, which was in line with what you just shared that I found fascinating, is in these really cool spaces. So they weren't childish by any means. They just had amazing things. Kids would rush in and didn't need a single instruction. They would form what friends they wanted to be with. They would start to compromise. There was just giggles from the start. And they would create these amazing like,

Wynne Leon (30:58)
Yeah.

Mm-hmm.

Yeah.

Mike Rucker, PhD (31:15)
you know, installations that were like joyous because they could, you know, play and move with them and then flexing their creativity brought them joy. While the parents in

these spaces, you would see them slowly but surely kind of back into the wall because they had no idea what to do. Right. And so I think because it's phenomena as well observed in most of these spaces, one of the curators would come by and be like, you know, like literally hand them a block.

Wynne Leon (31:30)

Right.

Mike Rucker, PhD (31:44)

And you would hear the, like, what am I supposed to do with this? I think one of big takeaways here, right? Is it's just that simple invitation to that. It's okay. just explore, the territory, you don't need a map, you know? And so, you know, it's just another reframe of exactly what you shared. So often we're like, we feel so stuck that we don't understand.

Wynne Leon (31:56)

Right. Right.

Mike Rucker, PhD (32:06)

that there isn't another way. And then this idea that we don't have time, just objectively. Isn't true. Even, know, these, this is kind of geeky. promise no more science, but I guess I like, but like even truly busy folks that have like, you know, are working, you know, like ER doctors and, uh, that, you know, that are truly working 70 hours a week.

Wynne Leon (32:18)

Hahaha

Mike Rucker, PhD (32:31)

Like you still have 168, you know, and so this idea that you can't find, you know, bits and pieces in your schedule. So, you know, it's just always, when put to scrutiny, not true. And again, so figuring out how to reclaim like two or three hours of that, becomes important if you're finding that you're, you know, there's nothing in your life that, that kind of brings you joy. And as soon as you get that taste.

which is, I've found just really pleasant surprise. You don't need much more help. you know, then something like the fun habit or whoever you're working with has done their job. because then you're like, ~ okay. And you figure out how to recalibrate. And the funny thing is like, that is one of the main mechanisms in no way. Am I comparing this to, you know, clinical psychology, but it's one of the main mechanisms of cognitive behavioral therapy.

for folks that do find themselves in a place where they need to find more joy, that's the exact recipe as well. And so I found that a bit validating too when someone let me know that there's a lot of parallels there with regards to like, let's just identify what did bring you

joy or what you think will bring you joy. And then let's make sure that shows up on your schedule. And I meant that's.

One last piece of advice with regards to that big question you asked me is that we know it, it's not just about talking about it. So the Fun File, and again, just real quickly, all that means is sitting down and trying to figure out, you know, what you might want in your schedule, something that you feel connected to a relationship to, not what you think, you know, it might be interesting. and then making sure that gets on your schedule. So that actually happens because a lot of folks will.

create that Fun File and then not do it.

Wynne Leon (34:22)

Well,

you know, it's funny, I actually, after reading your book, had my daughter, who's 10 going on 11, create her own Fun File. Because I think, you know, we see kids being able to have fun, but being intentional about it is a skill that they need to develop. And I couldn't imagine anything more helpful, you know, not only in modeling it, but in helping her build the systems to build in that.

that intentionality seemed like a good idea to me. Yeah.

Mike Rucker, PhD (34:54)

No, that's awesome. I, ~

I think one of the interesting things that I've heard, I've never worked with children specifically, but folks that have, done that exercise with their kids, it's neat because kids often do want and rightfully I'm in as part of child development, right? Model what they see. And so if you can actually get them to sit down and go, what is it that you want to do? You know, it will clue them in and oftentimes like then they'll invite their friends.

Wynne Leon (35:13)

Mm-hmm.

Right.

Mike Rucker, PhD (35:23)

do something they want to do instead of making it performative. And so it is, it seems to be helpful exercise, even for kids who generally know what to do. And then lastly, I think it's really neat for parents to do it with their kids that I have, worked with people, and co-creating that thing, because oftentimes parents are like, well, I just need to get them to this, so that they can have fun because that's, that's my role, right? Like Uber driver. And it's like, you know,

Wynne Leon (35:33)

Yeah.

Right. Right.

Mike Rucker, PhD (35:50)

No, I bet there are some things that they can say this is what they want to do and then you can build on top of it something that you still want to do with them. And now you can co-create that experience where you guys are doing something together. And if you both felt like you had agency doing it, then the likelihood of you guys enjoying it together will be much higher.

Wynne Leon (36:13)

Right? And you brought agency in again, which I love that. So, but you have some huge goals. Your Live Life Love project, which is 25 years of interviewing thought leaders, trying new things, giving back in hours and money to charity. So explain how we can make ambitious projects fun.

Mike Rucker, PhD (36:35)

Well, it's weird that you frame it as ambitious because I would argue that I meant the fact for doing it 25 years. Yeah, that was a long time horizon, but the beauty of that project. And I would argue anybody can do this is that I deliberately kept the bar low. I just, I wanted to do a hundred things and I was like, what seems reasonable that I could do, for a long time.

Wynne Leon (36:54)

Mm-hmm.

Mike Rucker, PhD (37:00)

when you look at, these systems that are meant to,

lead to an outcome of any kind. And I would argue even that is like creating a pretty fragile system. The rigor involved so that if it breaks, you're essentially, you just throw it out. Like I think that's one of the things we really get wrong because we know when we create systems that have flexibility where the bar is low, but then you could build on it if you want. So if you have a month of really high energy, it doesn't mean you can't do more. It just means

you know, this is the minimum that I commit to. And then having, a way to reenter it if something goes awry. We know if the systems are built that way that they hum a lot longer, you know, and life's, you know, an infinite game, right? For anyone that kind of knows that terminology, like finite games are win and lose, right? And, you know,

And that's the problem that a lot of these systems are set up that way. Like if you lose, then you stop playing the game. But we're not going to stop playing. Right. So why not create scaffolding or we can do cool things. And so for me, if people are listening like, wait, what's he talking about? I created a system where I just wanted to talk to really interesting people. I wanted to do something, you know, that like stretched me.

whether that was endurance or traveling or learning something new. But then I didn't want it to like completely be self-absorbed. So I added a component where over the course of the project, I would donate a year of my life, both in salary and time. And I figured, you know, again, over the course of 25 years, that seemed like a pretty low bar.

Wynne Leon (38:38)

Well, something that you said to me before we started recording was, enjoying what you're doing is the number one predictor. And you said this was based on some research for sticking to a habit. Right? And so you've given us so many clues in that answer about how to set the goals and then make it enjoyable.

Mike Rucker, PhD (38:58)

Yeah, that's what's been quite fun for me, quite frankly, is that after the book came out, there's been a bunch of replicated studies that show that we have definitely undervalued fun as a mechanism for doing the things that we want to do anyways, right? And so a lot of this comes from the wellness literature, but ~ as you know, I really like Dr.

Woolley out of Cornell. She's been doing a lot of amazing work here too. What we've learned, especially within the first six months of doing something new, whether or not you like to do it is by far the number one predictor of whether you'll stick with it. So how can someone take this insight and use it? Right? Like if you, if your goal is, just want to get fitter, then start thinking about the components instead of going, okay, well that must mean that I need to sign up for a gym.

even though just that thought is awful, but like that's going to be our go-to, right? Because we use the heuristics and sort of things that we've been, you know, taught or that we think is going to, you know, that we've been told is going to get us to that point. Like pull that back again, going back, you know, thanks for, you know, sharing the shower story, like pull back all those things that you, you know, think to be true and start to question them, right? Like is a gym

the right environment, you know, we'll just use getting healthy as a hypothetical goal. If you hate gyms and start thinking about what are some other environments that might be, you know, is nature something that you like to be in? Do you like to be around people and music? Maybe it's a group exercise, you know, studio that's not, that has your people, you know? And then, you know, that's a good segue into people like.

Are you someone that doesn't want to be around people when you're doing this? So is it a solo activity that would, you know, that maybe you should figure out, to be the main mechanism or lever, or you do like being around people and, you know, having that social contract of keep coming back would be something that would be motivating. then the activity itself, right? and, giving yourself some flexibility and treating each one of those as an experiment. You might be like,

You know what? I used to love cycling when I was a kid. I'm to try it again. And then you find out you hate it as an adult. Like that doesn't mean you have to give up. Give yourself the flexibility to, you know, be curious and play in that space until you find something that, is luring you back. I, you know, people laugh now just because it is such a phenomenon, but I think that's why pickleball is, you know, not just having its moment, but it's like certainly here to stay. Because.

all of those reasons, right? It's a low barrier. You still get better at it once you play. And the people that play it tend to be really fun. And you can kind of pick your tribe because it's not like, you know, and, and then it's still, you know, a good form of exercise, especially, you know, like for folks that might have mobility issues or things like that. So again, I'm not telling you go play pickleball. That's not, you know, yeah.

Wynne Leon (41:52)
Mm-hmm. Yeah.

Right, right, right. It's finding all

those elements that work for you. mean, and it reminds me back in before I had kids, I climbed mountains, but I would do it. It was a way to travel to with groups, you know, whether I had a friend with me or not, you know, go to Mexico, go to Russia, go to Nepal, and then work out in advance so that because I didn't want to embarrass myself in front of a group of people, right? And then also get the experience of.

I mean, you know, it was a system that worked.

Mike Rucker, PhD (42:37)
you know, cause I talked about it in the book, but my brother was an introvert, but he still wanted to be around people. So for him, he found a hiking group and that was like the perfect balance. Cause I guess in most hiking groups, there's, they attract folks like my brother. And so when he like realized, okay, I've had enough conversation and you know, now I just want to engage in walking. He would pull off from the group because.

Wynne Leon (42:47)
Mm-hmm.

Mike Rucker, PhD (43:02)

You know, that's the nice thing about a trail, right? And then you can catch up and so just figure it out. And the funnest thing too, is if you approach it with a level of playfulness and creativity, even if you have a few misses, like you can still chalk that up to having, you know, a good time trying to figure it out what, what your jam is like, ~ I never want to do that again with kind of a smile on the chuckle, right? Rather than like, this isn't working. ~

Wynne Leon (43:22)

Yeah. Yeah.

Yeah,

yeah, right. It's bringing in that agency to then keep improving the system. So one last question for you. You you wrote your book six years ago, I think in the pandemic, right? So is talking about fun fun for you?

Mike Rucker, PhD (43:42)

Yeah.

It is, but it's, you know, I, uh, we started this with a little self deprecation, so I'll end it with a little self deprecation. I think that the thing that is, really endearing to me is that, my daughter said that for all of my love of fun, I have found a way to make fun unfun.

Wynne Leon (43:54)

Yeah.

Mike Rucker, PhD (44:13)

by making it so scientific. So that's what, I think it's an interesting challenge, Especially someone that is like, this is cool. As a very general concept, I wanna come into this being entertained. I some colleagues in the play space that are really good at that, right? There's this really cool therapy.

Wynne Leon (44:18)

You

Mm-hmm.

Mike Rucker, PhD (44:40)

forget what the technical name is, like Lego assisted therapy where you use Legos as creativity. There's a whole like certification on it. ~ But it doesn't, yeah, yep. Yeah, a hundred percent. And you don't need to explain that, right? It's like, you know, people know how to use Legos and you know, all of the inner workings of, you know, how cool it is and how deep you can go on it doesn't need to be exposed.

Wynne Leon (44:45)

Mm-hmm, mm-hmm. Right.

It's good for groups and right to get them working together. Yeah.

Mm-hmm.

Mike Rucker, PhD (45:08)

But because I'm trying to share like why this is important or why fun needs a reframing you know, everything I do tends to be, this lecture. And so, I'm approaching that with curiosity. I've got some good mentors that are trying to teach me how to dial down the science and, you know, make it so it's more accessible. then, you know, for the folks that want the science, you know, expose it. but yeah, it's been really neat. And then what you already kind of alluded to.

Wynne Leon (45:17)

You

Mike Rucker, PhD (45:35)

This idea of how it can be more practical with regards, you know to the population as well. I think What's been really endearing? Yeah, I have this Thing that lets me know if folks are talking about the book and on reddit Especially, you know busy working moms like just that invitation to be like it's okay to take some time off the table and like the you Positive impact it's had on their life

It's been really cool. But then now figuring out how some of those mechanisms that have benefited the individual, again, how can we use them more broadly to get folks more healthy, get them into habits they want to do already, but actually make it so that they enjoy doing them and that they want to come back to them rather than making it feel like work.

That's been really rewarding and I'm just at the beginning of that.

Wynne Leon (46:34)

Yeah. that's great. Get people out of their habituated routines. Yeah. Mike, thank you so much for this conversation. I enjoyed it immensely, including the science. Cause I like that stuff, but your storytelling and your approach are just so refreshing. So thank you so much.

Mike Rucker, PhD (46:37)

Yeah.

Alright.

Thanks for having me. This has been a real pleasure.