Dave Asprey (00:00:01):

Man, today is going to be such a fun episode because we're going to talk about cynicism. You may have heard me say historically, two trolls that skeptics die. Something like six years ahead of people who are not skeptical. And I've done so much work on myself at 40 years of Zen and in caves and monasteries around the world to not have a glass half full or half empty, but to just have a glass with some stuff in it and to not judge it. And being not a Pollyanna where oh, everything is so good, but also not being the inverse of that where everything is so bad. This has been a path for me because I grew up in a family of skeptics. My grandparents subscribe for many years to the Skeptic Enquirer, which is a magazine that did what Snopes does or any of these other hater websites. Like well take down everyone who doesn't agree with whatever. So I grew up a cynic and a skeptic. And how would you like to learn from a professor of psychology at Stanford University and a director of the Stanford Social Neuroscience Lab who is an expert in synthesism and skepticism? I know I would like to learn. And our guest is Dr. Jamil Zaki. Who is that man? Jamil, welcome to the show.

Dr. Jamil Zaki (00:01:35):

It's great to be back, Dave,

Dave Asprey (00:01:37):

Man, last time we talked you were in a little covid closet and let's open with that. How did you stop yourself from becoming very cynical after this government response to Covid and the destruction of all these businesses, including a couple of mine? Did that leave a mark on you or did you overcome it?

Dr. Jamil Zaki (00:02:01):

I did not stop myself from being cynical during the pandemic. In fact, I failed completely in that task. And the reason that I started working on this book, hope for Cynics, is to figure out what was happening inside me. As you know Dave, I've studied the science of empathy, compassion, kindness for 20 years. So

Dave Asprey (00:02:25):

You're kind of a stud that way. I love that you're putting numbers and research behind these things that are generally the focus of religion and spiritual practice around the world. You're changing the world by making it safe for cynics to at least consider what you're talking about.

Dr. Jamil Zaki (00:02:41):

I hope so, and certainly I think sometimes that my work is just adding another angle to wisdom that people in many spiritual practices have had for thousands of years. But it's also this work on human goodness made me a kind of ambassador for our better angels. People bring me in to speak or write for them when they want to feel good about our species. And yet, during the pandemic and lockdown and all the isolation and sadness that came with it, I felt like just because I studied something and knew all about it didn't mean that I felt it. I felt this real split between my outer and inner worlds. I would be brought in and give a browsing talk on empathy and how great people were. And as soon as the zoom screen went black, I would go back to doom scrolling. I felt like I was secretly much more cynical than I was letting on. And I thought, well man, if I a scientist of human goodness is having a hard time believing in human goodness, what are the rest of us going through? And that set me on this journey to understand why it's so hard to have faith in one another, what that's doing to us and what we can do about it.

Dave Asprey (00:04:00):

Why is it so hard?

Dr. Jamil Zaki (00:04:02):
Well, part of it is the way that we are wired.

Dave Asprey (00:04:05):
Yeah.

Dr. Jamil Zaki (00:04:05):
Human beings experience what's known as negativity bias. We pay lots more attention to threats in our environment than to the good stuff. We pay more visual attention. We look more closely at threatening versus positive information. We remember negative events better than positive events, and we make decisions more based on what we don't want to lose as opposed to what we want to gain. And you can see why that would make sense from a almost survival perspective. 200,000 years ago, the person who was worried about the saber-tooth tiger probably did better than the person next to them who was blissed out by the sunset.

Dave Asprey (00:04:47):
Can I share some thinking with you? I was going to bring this up later in the interview, but it feels like this is a good framework that our audience understands. Please, that supports what you just said so thoroughly. I definitely was a skeptical, cynical guy when I was younger. I'm also a lot angrier. Funny enough, those go together, don't I? But since I studied mitochondrial biology and I'm a computer hacker and a systems engineer kind of guy, I realize all life on the planet has to follow basic rules. And these are basic rules that have to work for bacteria, not for complex life forms. And it turns out it doesn't matter if you're a tree or a slime mold or a person. Number one, if it's scary, run away from kill or hide. Is it different life forms like trees will make bark or make toxins or make spikes or jellyfish will sting you or bacteria make toxins or form biofilms.

(00:05:45):
And humans, we form tribes and we make weapons and all, but it's always fear is number one. And that makes sense because if something eats you, your species may end from the point of view of a bacteria, right? So fear that there's a negativity bias explained evolutionarily. And the second thing that all life has to do is eat everything that's food, the afterwards. So fear and then food. And this is why people eat all the pizza and all the cheesecake at the same time because you're the basic building blocks of your body, single cells and subcellular things, they're wired to do that whether or not you're in there. In fact, they do it before you're in there. So fear food. And then let's see, we'll have to reproduce to keep life around. So fear, food, what's the other? The third F word

Dr. Jamil Zaki (00:06:28):
Romance.

Dave Asprey (00:06:30):
Romance is not an F effort. It's fertility. I know you're about to draw off an F bomb, but you're from Stanford. You guys don't do that over there except when you're drunk. I'm just kidding. So fear of food, fertility. And then the fourth one that all life does universally is friend, but they do these in order. And the fifth one in my framework is forgiveness, which is to evolve and to let go of unnecessary fears so that you're more effective and efficient as a life form. And this works for any life form including us. And what that leads to though is this idea that we do these things. I don't think it's me doing that. I think it's my operating system doing that, and it's doing it kind of against my will and invisibly. And the more I gain awareness, the more I gain consciousness, the more I can laugh at the way my body responds to the world

and I don't identify that as me. It's like I have a split personality. There's an automated system that does all the animal stuff, and then I get to choose whether I believe what it shows me or not. But man, that's been an enormous amount of work and it's allowed me to drop the cynicism and replace it with discernment so I can feel something and then decide if that's real. Is that a good framework? Does it support what you're talking about? I looking for holes in it.

Dr. Jamil Zaki (00:07:48):

I have so much to say in response to this first, what you're describing reminds me of the first time that I trekked through the Amazon many years ago in Peru, and I remember going through this little tributary and all of these plants, this dense plant life everywhere and noticing that their plants grow so quickly that you could actually see them interacting with one another, almost like a stop motion film. And the interaction was incredibly aggressive. You could see plants attacking one another, trying to suffocate one another. Even the vines that seemed harmless if you looked closer, had tiny syringe like spikes coming out of them. It was just this battle. And I thought to myself, wow, this is what nature is like if you juice it enough, if you give it enough fuel. But of course there was also so much fertility and I mean whether you want to call it friendship or not, so much collaboration in that environment as well, right down to slime molds all the way up to mammals.

(00:08:58):

And so there are these forces in us, these default settings that we all have. I think that what you are describing though is how awareness of our default settings can help us overcome them or at least counteract them when we want to. There's something in psychology that we call the naturalistic fallacy, the idea that because something is natural, because it's evolved, that somehow means it's good for us, right? That's not what nature looks like to me. Exactly. I mean natural and good are not the same thing all the time, and we have so many default settings in our brains that we probably don't want to accept. I'm wired to like people who are the same race as me more than people who are a different race than me. Do I just want to accept that instinct? Of course not. We as an evolved species, as an egalitarian species reject that I'm more likely to judge somebody morally as a bad person if I'm hungry than if I've just eaten lunch.

(00:10:00):

Do I want to accept that? Of course not. That's not a rational basis for decision-making. It's not a way that I think any of us want to live our lives and cynicism. This idea that we want to take that fear in that instinctive fear and turn it into an entire worldview is something that a lot of us accept, but hurts us at basically every level that psychologists can measure what you are describing, this sort of sense that, hey, I'm going to watch my instincts arrive, then use them as one source of information, but not the only source of information and try to make more integrative informed decisions. There's two things that I want to say about that. One connects right back to the spiritual traditions you were talking about. This is a practice of careful noticing and of awareness, but two, and I do want to push back Dave on something that you said.

(00:10:54):

Please do. Yeah, you've been using cynicism and skepticism interchangeably. Explain the difference. I love this. Okay, tell me. Well, because I think what you're actually describing is that maybe members of your family when you were growing up were cynics, meaning that they trusted that negativity bias. They listened to that instinct actually in a sort of naive way and plastered it all over everything that they saw. They assumed that people are on the take. They assumed that they couldn't trust anybody. You think of what's the opposite of a cynic, somebody who naively trusts, but cynics naively mistrust. So they're actually in a way as gullible as the rubes and marks that they make fun of. Wow, that's gold. By contrast, skeptics don't carry a blanket assumption about everybody or everything. If cynics think like lawyers in the prosecution against humanity, skeptics think like scientists. They say, well, let me gather all the evidence I can and again, put it together, integrate it into the most informed decision possible at this

moment. So skepticism I would say is what you've tried to grow into. You've tried to grow out of cynicism and into a more scientific, contemplative and skeptical approach to the world, which as we can talk about is enormously healthier.

Dave Asprey (00:12:23):

It is healthier. I'm not sure though that I would identify as a skeptic where I am curious, I'm looking for evidence. Most of the people I know who would say I'm skeptical, maybe they're just all cynics and they're calling themselves the wrong name, but they will fundamentally believe somebody. I think it was Neil Degra Tyson said, extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence.

Dr. Jamil Zaki (00:12:51):

That's

Dave Asprey (00:12:51):

Bullshit. The reality is if it's science, evidence is evidence. And it doesn't matter if you think it's extraordinary. The reality is we either have evidence or we don't, and that you can put no weight on that. And to me, all of the things that help me lose a hundred pounds and get my brain in this amazing place and have a sense of peace, they all came from just looking at evidence and saying, oh, it's possible. Show me a corner case and I'm not going to discount the corner case. I'm going to go there and investigate it. And if it was fake, then I'm not going to go there anymore. But if it was real, now I know it's possible and I'm going to do it. Is there a word for that? Is that still a skeptic?

Dr. Jamil Zaki (00:13:33):

That's absolutely skepticism. Interesting. I do think that we have been, I completely agree with you, that you've, well, I believe you that you've probably heard many people describe themselves as skeptics and then be really negative or try to shoot down other ideas. Those people are wrong in the name that they're using for themselves. And one of my many missions with this new project is to help us be more precise in our language because I think it really matters. I, since writing this book and writing more and talking more about hope and cynicism, I have all sorts of people who write to me angrily saying, I'm not a cynic, I'm a realist, or I'm a skeptic. And this is what I encountered, Dave, when I started studying empathy as well. People were using this word to mean a dozen different things and talking past each other.

(00:14:22):

I believe that precise language about the human mind allows us to work more precisely with it and to shape our minds to meet our goals, but we have to know what we're looking for. And I do think that being open to evidence, curious and data-driven are the qualities of a skeptic I would add to this. And one flourish that I try to put on skepticism for people is what call hopeful skepticism. That is not only being open to evidence, but also being aware that we process information asymmetrically. So if you're picking up evidence, if you interact with 50 people in a given day, 48 of them are open-minded, kind, generous, and friendly, and two of them are assholes, those two people will become your memory or will be the headlines of your memory for the day. That is a biased way of processing information. So hopeful skepticism means being open and simultaneously aware that we are probably picking up more on negative than positive information, especially social information and trying to rebalance that by saying, probably if I pay close attention, pleasant surprises will be everywhere. People might be better than I realize

Dave Asprey (00:15:47):

You said if I pay close attention, one of the things that I've been a proponent of since the very early posts I did a dozen years ago is the value of a gratitude practice and a gratitude journal. And when I started this practice, okay, three things at the end of the day that I'm grateful for, and then Dr. Barry Morlon, who's

been on the show, a very popular episode, he said, well, why don't you see if you can find 50? And it took me a while and I realized completely invisibly, there's a process running in my brain that erases the good stuff. And I'm sitting here at the end of the day and I'm going through, I forgot a dozen good things that happened that day, and that was the day I got a phone call from my agent saying, congratulations, you made the New York Times list again.

Dr. Jamil Zaki (00:16:35):

Well, I

Dave Asprey (00:16:35):

Had forgotten that by the evening, and it took me a lot of plumbing, the depths, I go, oh my God, that just happened. How could I forget? And I think that drives us to become cynics because we don't know that we're erasing all the good stuff. And it took me a long time where I could sit down anytime and say, God, what are 50 things that happen? Just little good things. They're gone. Yep. From your memory, unless you train it, do you have a practice like that?

Dr. Jamil Zaki (00:17:02):

I do. It's a little bit different. I love gratitude practices and I think they're one of the most robust and well supported ways of improving happiness and social connection. One thing about gratitude is it relies on the fidelity of our memory. And as you're saying, we erase positive events very quickly. I do this with my teaching reviews. I teach a 500 person class each fall, and I get the teaching reviews at the end of the quarter, and invariably something like 480 of them will be positive, some will be neutral, but what are the ones three days later when I'm trying to go to sleep, that pop up in my mind it's like, what don't you like about that shirt? Which shirt did you not like? I just hang on to the one negative piece of, and so a sort of rotation of a gratitude practice that I try and I do with my kids as well is savoring,

Dave Asprey (00:17:59):

What does that mean?

Dr. Jamil Zaki (00:18:00):

Well, if gratitude is remembering good things that happened during the day, for instance, savoring is making sure to notice them systematically and try to note them as they happen. So this is a practice written beautifully about by Fred Bryant, the psychologist. And I think that it's a hedge against our biased memories. Now, I'm not saying that we should all go around with a notebook and meticulously document every single thing that happens to us, but I think that slightly more real time documentation, not end of day, but end of event, when something meaningful happens to you, you don't have to spend 15 minutes, spend 15 seconds just jotting that down. If you integrate that savoring with a gratitude, slightly longer gratitude practice, at the end of the day, you're much more likely to have an accurate accounting of what actually occurred and much less likely to let the good events from that day, especially the good social events, the evidence of human goodness you've experienced recede into the landfill of lost memories

Dave Asprey (00:19:12):

For about a month. I carried a piece of paper around every day and I wrote stuff down until I just got the ability to do that In my head. It was a very valuable exercise. But the evidence of human goodness, which is in the title of your book about human goodness, I look at human kindness versus human goodness. What's the difference?

Dr. Jamil Zaki (00:19:35):

I mean, I think goodness is a much less scientific term, not that kindness is the most precise term either. I think of goodness as the qualities that we appreciate in other people. That includes kindness, which could be considered some mix of pro-social behavior doing for others and compassion feeling for others. I think it also includes other qualities. We appreciate when the folks around us are attentive, when they're open-minded, they're warm and friendly. And I think all of those qualities are systematically underestimated in our species. I don't just think that the data are very clear. Dave, it was actually really surprised I told you that I started this project in the depths of my own covid cynicism. And one might think that the worst thing a person could do in that state is spend three years marinating in the data on suspicion, mistrust, and hopelessness and despair. But ironically, that deep dive made me more hopeful about our species than anything that I've done in my career studying all the good stuff. Now, why would that be? Well, because I discovered that cynicism isn't just hurtful and we can talk about how it is if you like. It's just plain wrong. Of course, there are people out there doing harmful things every day. We read about them in the news constantly. We see them on social media.

Dave Asprey (00:21:09):

Politicians,

Dr. Jamil Zaki (00:21:09):

You mean politicians? I mean, all sorts of people do all sorts of bad things. I'm just kidding. But the data that we're getting, again, we process it asymmetrically, but we also receive asymmetric data. We receive so much information about the minority of people doing terrible things and even the minority of acts that a person does that are their worst. And so it turns out that if you look at just dozens and dozens of studies over decades, that has led to a place where if you ask people about what others are like, they're just wrong. They don't know how trustworthy other people are. We don't know how generous other people are. We don't know how open-minded they are, and we don't know how warm they are. We don't know how much they'd like to talk with us and support us and be there with us. And so in essence, cynics are leaving on the table the opportunity for a lot of what we want in life, connection to others, cohesive community collaboration. And that might seem like, wait a minute, you just said this made you more hopeful. That's even more depressing. But it suggests that there are incredible opportunities available to any of us who are willing to drop the bias in the way that we process information, who are willing to be more even handed and skeptical instead of cynical.

Dave Asprey (00:22:37):

One of the big learnings I've had over the past, probably five years or so, is that there are bad people out there. 4% of people are sociopaths or psychopaths, maybe 6%. And there are a bunch of people who are somewhere on the narcissism spectrum where they will look you in the face and they will tell you something that is not true that they wish was true. And if you fall for that, it will cause you harm. I mean, I got fired from Bulletproof a few years ago and they ended up selling the company for about 10% of what it was worth when I was there. And I'm like, what just happened? And it would've been very easy for me to be stuck in a really angry place from that. And it took some work, and the work was actually all around forgiveness. Fortunately, I run a neuroscience company that focuses on forgiveness, so I was able to let that go. And I recently, well, not that recently, three or so years ago, consciously uncoupled from my wife, same thing, lots and lots of forgiveness, which allowed me to maintain, but I realized I sucked at discernment. How do people know whether they're dealing with someone who's trustworthy or not? Because you're going to not feel safe. You're not going to feel good if you're surrounded by people who aren't takers,

Dr. Jamil Zaki (00:24:04):

Of course. And again, the perspective that I'm offering is not that we should replace cynical blanket negative assumptions with Pollyannish blanket positive assumptions. I

Dave Asprey (00:24:18):

Think I was a little naive. I'm a lot better now, but I'm not cynical. Just show me that you're trustworthy and if you show me once you're not, you're out.

Dr. Jamil Zaki (00:24:27):

Yeah, yeah. I mean, I think that's fair. And what economists talk about is a process known as trust but verify.

(00:24:37):

That is if you want to learn about somebody, maybe don't start with your assumptions about them, good or bad. Try to again, think like a scientist and act like a scientist. Try to give people a chance to show you who they are, and then process that information, update your expectations about them. And the other thing I would say, and it sounds like you did this really wisely in the face of real difficult experiences, is to keep our inferences local. What do I mean by that? It makes perfect sense that if somebody takes advantage of you, you should feel disappointed in that person. You should maybe lower your expectations of future interactions with them

Dave Asprey (00:25:20):

With that person, though not all people.

Dr. Jamil Zaki (00:25:22):

Yes, yes. You're way ahead of me here. What I think we often do, and I don't just think this again, the data are clear, is we often extrapolate and over generalize, disappointment and betrayal are too good a teacher sometimes they don't just teach us about that one instance. They teach us about the whole world. And the paradigm case of this is trauma. And again, first and foremost, compassion and solidarity for people who go through traumatic and especially interpersonally traumatic events, I mean, it makes perfect sense that your brain is reeling, your body is reeling, you're wanting to be safe. I completely understand having been there myself. The issue is when that craving for safety diminishes our opportunities and our lives afterwards. And one way that that happens is when disappointment in one person turns into what I call pre disappointment in everybody, the sense that the only way I can be safe is to never count on anybody again, which turns out in the long run to be a very dangerous strategy for us,

Dave Asprey (00:26:32):

It's very dangerous, and sometimes it doesn't go to all people. It can be to all people of one sex or all people of one race, or all people of one social class, or all the other ways that our brains just make quick and easy decisions that feel really good even though they're not real. I spent three days last week with my girlfriend, Christina Weber runs something called the Love Club Immersion. We had about 25 people spending three days focusing on healthy relationships, and every single one of them, these are successful people, had relationship trauma in the past that was holding him back because our operating system will just say, oh, I was hurt by a woman or a man, therefore it's going to happening from any woman or any man. Yes, but none of this is logical. It feels so real inside the body. How do we get out of our head and into our feelings? So we just get beyond that?

Dr. Jamil Zaki (00:27:27):

It's a hard thing to do, but this is what emotion focused therapy is all about. This is a form of therapy, not only but often used in the context of relationships that focuses on what we could call attachment wounds. So oftentimes when people can't trust in an adult relationship, it's actually not because of a betrayal in a previous romantic relationship, but because they didn't feel safe or cared for as children. So we're talking about decades old feelings of insecurity that we are passing on to our new relationships. And in EFT, there's a bunch of things that people try to do. One is to acknowledge and give compassion to the child they were who didn't receive what they needed. It's very hard to move forward without looking back first. And there's a term re-parenting in EFT.

Dave Asprey (00:28:27):

Don't that work,

Dr. Jamil Zaki (00:28:28):

Right? Yeah, me too. Where you try to back and be present for yourself in a way that people weren't for you earlier in life. And a second is to find moments of safety in your adult relationships. And that's not just with other people with yourself as well, to become a haven for yourself first and then slowly to build out more of a sense that you have a Haitian with others.

Dave Asprey (00:28:59):

Safety is a state that's internally generated both in men and women. I think it's a little bit different for each of the different sexes on average. And when it's internally generated, other people feel it around you, which allows them to step more into their own safety and to sort of expand. How does one go about generating an internal sense of safety so that you don't have to be cynical?

Dr. Jamil Zaki (00:29:27):

It's hard work and it takes time, but it is possible in EFT. They even talk about earned attachment, that if you didn't have the foundation you needed, you can build it for yourself. How do you go about that? There's a few things that I think can be helpful. One comes from my colleague at Stanford, Jeff Cohen's lab. Jeff focuses on values affirmation that is he'll give people a set of 20 things that might matter to them in life, relationships, success, strength, humor. And he says, pick one of these that matters a lot to you. Write about why it matters to you and write about how you express it in your life. And it turns out that people who do this practice regularly of focusing on what matters to them and how they're living those values, they feel safer. They feel more secure in themselves. They're less fragile when it comes to their opinions, for instance.

(00:30:29):

That's one step. Another is to practice, and I'm sure that you have talked a lot about this on the show, but self-compassion is a way of meeting our own suffering and being there for ourselves. As you said, safety, a feeling that arises internally. And I think a lot of us, myself included, have a pretty easy time finding care for others and a very difficult time finding care for ourselves. And self-compassion is the practice of doing what often comes naturally when we are parenting, when we are being a friend, when we are being a mentor, and pointing that energy back at ourselves to create that sense of safety. Sometimes nobody else can protect you, but you can protect yourself and to generate that space and to generate that care along with values, affirmation, that's a kind of one two punch I think, for creating a foundation of safety from which we can then move and build towards relationships with others.

Dave Asprey (00:31:38):

Beautifully said. You mentioned EFT. I realize some listeners may not know about that. It's called emotional freedom Technique, and it's basically tapping. If you listen to the episode with Nick Orner,

who's a good friend, or Dawson Church, another friend, we talk about that a lot. And this is something that drives me insane. As a scientific computer science guy, you're telling me that if I tap like this or I tap like this and I say an affirmation, it's going to do something and I don't want it to work. Maybe that's some cynical leftover thing of me because what the heck? So I finally think I understand you're just dealing with layers of your operating system that are not visible to your conscious brain. They're not supposed to be visible. They don't even want you to know about them.

(00:32:25):

But I've had profound results, not really on physical stuff very often. Some people can resolve pain that way, but some of my emotional blocks or even some esoteric spiritual things, sometimes tapping is powerful stuff. And so if you're feeling always triggered, therefore always cynical about something, maybe listen to one of those episodes. I'll put the links in the show notes for you or find a therapist who does that. And a lot of the stuff that's been most freeing for me is almost not logical. It's not about what's going on in my brain, it's about what's going on inside my heart, inside my cells. And it's that division where most people think they are the same thing as what's going on in their operating system versus in their conscious mind. Do you think those are separate consciousnesses inside of you, or are they all one?

Dr. Jamil Zaki (00:33:21):

Oh, that's such an interesting question. I think that they are all one in that we have a unified conscious experience, but I think they are multi sourced. So we have the illusion of a single cohesive experience, but that experience draws from so many different pathways, some of which we are aware of and some of which we're not. And I think you aptly say that we confuse this cacophony of different sources with just the truth about who we are. I would add to that, Dave, that we confuse the cacophony of information we're receiving from inside our body and outside with an accurate depiction of the world.

Dave Asprey (00:34:10):

It's not accurate at

Dr. Jamil Zaki (00:34:11):

All. We have, I mean, this is what my wonderful late colleague Lee Ross called naive realism. So if I feel skittish around you, if I feel nervous around you, it's because you're a bad person. If we disagree about something, it's because you are wrong. You don't have the data that you need. Not ever because I'm wrong. If I like music, it's because it's good, not because it reminds me of what my mother is saying to me when I was an infant. And I think that one of the practices of anti cynicism is frankly trusting our values more, but trusting our beliefs less, if that makes sense. It's understanding who we are and what we want out of life, but not over rotating on every inference we draw in a particular situation because those inferences are so noisy and based on so much bad intel that our body might be giving us or that the world might be providing as well.

Dave Asprey (00:35:18):

It can feel overwhelming. And I've been with so many friends when they start just realizing this stuff, but I think a lot of cynicism comes from just not feeling safe. What if I'm wrong? And having worked with a lot of people at 40 years of Zen where we go really deep into childhood stuff, sometimes it's a teacher, they criticize you in class or a parent says, well, if you don't know it, you're not worthy of love and things like that. And then you end up years later as an adult thinking, well, if I'm wrong, instead of I just didn't know something or I made a mistake where I'm a bad person, and this is a really common thing. I had a conversation with one of my teenagers about this who was being really defensive about something, didn't make any sense. And we got into it and it was like, oh my gosh, how many adults are stuck with this deep subconscious programming that if I'm wrong, I'm bad,

Dr. Jamil Zaki (00:36:17):
Versus if

Dave Asprey (00:36:18):
I'm wrong, I'll learn. How do you get over that?

Dr. Jamil Zaki (00:36:22):
I mean, this is the difference between guilt and shame, right? Guilt is I made a mistake. Shame is I am a mistake. And again, I mean, I think that the same way that we over judge others based on single instances of their behavior. I mean, somebody cuts me off in traffic. I suddenly feel like I know everything about their soul, and we treat ourselves that way as well. We don't have as privileged information about others or about us as we think. And again, this is a place that I think skepticism can be helpful. You make a mistake, whether that's to trust somebody that you shouldn't have trusted or to say something you shouldn't have said. And it's easy to feel really unsafe. Like, wait a minute, maybe I'm a bad person. Maybe I'll never experience love. And that draws you in into a defensive position that actually, again, over the long run is quite unsafe.

(00:37:25):
And this is a point that I do want to draw out because I think, again, with all compassion and understanding, people who have been hurt often shrink. They don't want to trust others because they don't want to be hurt again, and they think it's safe. But really being pre disappointed, being cynical is safe only in the way that house arrest is safe, right? I mean, sure, you won't get run over by a bus if you stay in your room for the rest of your life, but what will you lose? And it turns out that over the long term, people who can't open themselves up be vulnerable and trusting they might be betrayed less often, but they also lose the ability or the opportunity, let's say, to feel real connection with others. And that over the long term is devastating to our physical and mental health.

(00:38:24):
Yes, it increases loneliness, depression, anxiety, substance abuse, but it also increases cellular aging, creates more sleep disruption, and eventually leads to heart disease. As you said, there are long prospective studies of thousands of people that find that more cynical folks, people who are less willing to trust others who think that trust is a sucker's game actually end up dying younger than non cynics. Maybe the most famous quote about cynicism comes from the philosopher Thomas Hobbes, who 500 years ago said that we needed strict government because left to our own devices, human lives are nasty British and short. But ironically, the people who might reflect that best are cynics themselves by deciding that about humanity, we make it more likely that our own lives will be diminished and cut short at the end.

(00:39:57):
Yeah. Yes. Yeah, that's right. And a lot of my lab these days is studying what we call social risk taking, and risk taking almost has a bad rap in our culture. It sounds like a bad thing to do, which I think is terrible. I think if you reflect on the fact that risky behavior is almost a pejorative, like an insulting thing to say that somebody's, oh, this person is engaged in risky behavior, that speaks to something really broken in our public conversations. And it turns out that social risk taking things like striking up a conversation with a stranger, disclosing what you're going through, your struggles to a new friend, trying to support somebody, expressing gratitude, all of these being vulnerable, being vulnerable, all of them forms of vulnerability. There's a whole bunch of data from the last 10 years or so suggesting that we are too risk averse, that our risk calculation in the social world is miscalibrated in ways that are really clear and very hurtful.

(00:41:36):

So my friend Nick Ely at UChicago and lots of other people studied under sociality, and it turns out that if you ask people, Hey, what would it be like if you struck up a conversation with a stranger on your commute today? Or if you thanked that third grade teacher who made a difference in your life or complimented somebody, people are like, oh man, that would be incredibly cringe, awkward. It would not be fun. It would not be nourishing for me. If you then force a separate group of people to have those interactions and say, well, how was that? They say, it's amazing. It was so fulfilling. It was not awkward at all. So we really don't know how good interactions with each other will be. And part of that is because we're too cynical about people. So at Stanford, my lab and I surveyed thousands of undergraduates and we asked them two types of questions.

(00:42:31):

One about themselves, how empathic are you? How much do you like helping peers who are struggling? How much would you like to meet new friends on campus? And then we asked, how do you think the average Stanford student would answer these questions? And we discovered, not one, but to Stanford's the actual community was full of warm, caring people who wanted to connect, but in their mind, students' average peer was cold and prickly and judgmental, or at least more than the reality. And students who didn't know how much others wanted to connect took fewer social risks and ended up more socially isolated six months later. So there's this cycle where we don't realize how much others want to connect, and we think we're alone. We think that we're the only lonely people who wish for more stronger relationships, and because we don't realize that about each other, we stay alone to our own detriment. A

Dave Asprey (00:43:30):

While ago, I had the surgeon general on the show, and the only book he's ever written was about the epidemic of disconnection of people. And the number of close friends we have has gone down dramatically. And something like, don't quote me on exactly these things, it's a memory, but something like 30% of people report having not even one single close friend. And this is because we've fetishized safety.

Dr. Jamil Zaki (00:43:56):

Yes.

Dave Asprey (00:43:56):

Instead of I choose danger, I'm going to go out and say, Hey, nice shoes or whatever. It doesn't matter if the person responds negatively, it's probably because something's wrong with them. It's not something's wrong with you,

Dr. Jamil Zaki (00:44:09):

Or they're just having a bad day or whatever. They

Dave Asprey (00:44:12):

Oatmeal for breakfast and their blood sugar was crashing. Who would've

Dr. Jamil Zaki (00:44:15):

Thought I called these social shark attacks. So shark attacks are one of the most, at least for me, one of the most terrifying things that could happen to a person. But they're extraordinarily rare. The thing is that they're so vivid that they live in our mind and shape our behavior in ways that are totally unnecessary. You don't need to avoid going into the ocean because you're going to get eaten by a shark. That basically never happens, but people do all the time. They're fearing something that they don't need to fear and

trying to be safe in a way that actually ends up hurting them. And I think that you see this all over our social lives. You see it in our parenting as well, you and I, Dave, but a lot of us in our generation have raised our kids to try to keep them as safe as possible, not to help them explore the world.

(00:45:08):

And that has led to a generation that is much less trusting and more anxious than in previous decades that the good news here, and I do want to give some good news. I mean, again, somehow studying cynicism has made me much less cynical because the idea is that we're wrong about this. We overestimate the risks and underestimate the opportunity. And so we don't take enough risks, we don't take enough risks in our social lives, but all you need to do to shift our risk profile to something healthier and more optimal is not lie to people. It's to tell them the truth. At Stanford, we had a campaign, an advertising campaign that we ran where the target audience was Stanford undergraduates and the product was also Stanford undergraduates. We targeted certain dorms and we put posters all around those dorms just showing people the real data about what their peers said.

(00:46:10):

Did you know 95% of your peers would love to help somebody who's struggling? Did you know 85% of the people around you want to make new friends? And we paired that with some psychoeducation where again, people learned only the real data. And we found that people who learned what their peers were really like were first of all happier, they were more willing to take social risks, and they made more friends over the subsequent six months. So this is a vicious cycle of mistrust, de-risking and missed connections that can be remedied, not again, by lying to people, not by only showing them the good stuff or being pollyannish, but by showing them real data.

Dave Asprey (00:46:55):

Wow, what a profound practice just to do that. In college, I remember I had a belief that is definitely cynical that I'm in this alone. I'm going to have to do this by myself. And in my freshman year of college, I was in an entrepreneur focus group. I wanted to be an entrepreneur, didn't know how, and a guy was probably 50 showed up and said, oh, I'm happy to show you everything. And my programming was, well, he's going to want something in return and it's not safe. And I didn't take advantage of it. And that was actually right around the time that the first product ever sold over the internet before the browser even was made was a caffeine. I sold out of my dorm room, and I don't want to say I kick myself, I just look back, I kind of laugh at myself now, but at the same time I was doing that Mark Andreessen, a famous investor,

Dr. Jamil Zaki (00:47:52):

Of course,

Dave Asprey (00:47:53):

He created the first web browser, Netscape and Mark was like, let me go to Silicon Valley and find someone who's done this a lot of times and have him teach me. So he was willing to receive help because he didn't have cynicism me. I'm like, I will do this all by myself. And I just got tired of putting T-shirts in bags. He was like, I've had enough of this and didn't make much out of it. I've had a great career. I'm not complaining. But the difference in a Mark Zuckerberg or a Mark Andreessen is that they didn't have that cynicism about receiving help because somehow they understood people want to help where I am now. People always want to help, not just me. I help people all the time with their business stuff or their personal stuff, and my businesses are all about helping people. And you realize the inherent human goodness is that final or that friend F word is that we genuinely feel good in service to others. It puts us in a flow state.

Dr. Jamil Zaki (00:48:59):

Absolutely.

Dave Asprey (00:49:00):

And we forget it all the time. What's the best way to remind ourselves that humans are good and want to help?

Dr. Jamil Zaki (00:49:09):

This is a great question, and I think that we've talked about thinking like scientists. I think a great way to remind ourselves of what people are really like is to act like scientists as well. The monk and author, one of my favorites, Pima Chodron says, we can treat our lives like an experiment. We can interrupt the usual cycle of thought and explore more actively. That's a paraphrase by the way. She writes so much better, so much more eloquently than I speak. But this is what I try to do. I do what I call taking leaps of faith on other people. Now, this is not sending my bank information to a prince who's going to wire me $14 million. It's not being naive or pollyannish or being taken advantage of. It's taking calculated risks. Again, to show that I believe in people. Earnest Hemingway said, the best way to find out if you can trust somebody is to trust them.

(00:50:14):

But it doesn't just teach us about people. When we trust them, it changes them. One thing that we haven't talked about today is self-fulfilling prophecies. It turns out that people become who we think they are because who we think they are affects how we treat them and how we treat them affects how they treat us in response. So cynics, because they start out with this bleak assumption, treat others in contemptuous and mistrustful ways and bring out their most selfish side. When we practice hopeful skepticism, instead we treat people like the folks we hope they are, instead of the people we fear they will become. And as a result, we bring out their best. We witness human goodness all the time, and it is there whenever we want to see it. My friend, Dacker Kelder studies, awe, this emotion that we get when we experience vastness and feel like we're part of something greater than ourselves.

(00:51:16):

And you might think of awe as, okay, I'm looking at the Milky Way on a dark night or a mountain scape or a grove of redwood trees. But in surveys of thousands of people, Dacker asked them, what made you feel awe today? And the most common response was what he calls moral beauty, the everyday kindness of other people. So you're asking, how do we get better at witnessing this? Again, I want to say we just pay closer attention. We give people chances, we think and act like scientists. Again, this is not about being naive, it's about being aware. And when we are aware that goodness bubbles up from every corner of our lives. I'm not saying that everybody is great all the time at all, but we underestimate how much of it there is around us all the time.

Dave Asprey (00:52:14):

It turns out that gratitude and awe our necessary for deep forgiveness. And when I have people go through my 40 years of Zen program in Seattle, five day, mostly executives and celebrities and people in order to let go of some belief that was put in there without your consent when you were young, the thing that opens the door is recognizing gratitude and feeling awe. And lately I added ketamine as an option to that program. You don't have to. People have ketamine like experience without it, but ketamine ramps up the awe and it ramps up neuroplasticity when it's used under medical supervision. And that leads to a question for you. What is the role of psychedelics in seeing human goodness?

Dr. Jamil Zaki (00:53:07):

There's a lot of data coming out on this, and I won't pretend to be an expert in that entire literature. I know that there are some studies that find that therapy with psychedelics and in particular MDMA can in essence open us to perceiving other people. I don't think there's work on cynicism in particular, but focus us on perceiving them empathically. And my sense is that the more clearly you see people, the more you witness their goodness. So one could extrapolate and say, well, maybe there's a connection there. But again, I don't want to get out over my skis as an empiricist here, but I think that intuitively you can see the connection pretty clearly.

Dave Asprey (00:53:54):

Since I moved to Austin a couple years ago, I've gotten to know a few groups of friends, and I'm someone who has friends all over the world because I travel extensively to speak on big stages and for my work in the world, and I'm really inspired. These are people, one group I'm thinking of in particular in their early thirties where they all, I dunno how kind of became conscious communicators and this is a dozen plus people, and they're all real with each other because somehow they cultivated trust in that friend network. And there's some of the happier people then they all have their struggles and

Dr. Jamil Zaki (00:54:34):

All, of course, but

Dave Asprey (00:54:35):

It's so inspiring to me. I didn't have that at that age where people were just so real. They learned how to have a trusted group of people where they could just show up and be themselves and not have all the drama and pain and fear. How would you advise young people to build a trusted group like that? Is there a process? Is there a learning? What's the trick?

Dr. Jamil Zaki (00:55:02):

Wow. I think that one thing is to be more open to initiating relationships. The more people we connect with, the more we can find who our people are. We can find our tribe. I think that the second piece is, again, this is a type of social risk taking, but one thing that I think we see in our social network studies of Stanford is that there are certain people who have what we would call betweenness centrality. And this sounds like the wonkiest phrase. What does that mean? It means that they connect people who are not otherwise connected, that they are social bridges between groups. And I think that finding your people, finding a trusting community requires the bravery, the courage to not just have isolated relationships that are great, but to bring those people together as well. Community is an active practice. It's not something that happens to you. And so the more ownership we can take over our communities, the more active that we can be as stewards of those communities, the more likely they are to cohere and come together. There

Dave Asprey (00:56:19):

Are people who are super connectors or have that superpower of community and safe spaces. I'm thinking like Joe Polish, who's been on the show, a group of 500 entrepreneurs who genuinely, it's amazing, the kind of experiences or JJ Virgin who does entrepreneurship for health, who's also been on the show and taught me how to be in the New York Times for the first time. I'm genuinely helping people who have that special ability to just know all this stuff about all the people and match people with the right ones. So one thing that I wish I'd have known earlier is it's possible to find people like that and then join their tribe. If you have good discernment and you realize, okay, if that's not your superpower, you can find a group and join it or you can make your own. Very, I'd say in my early twenties I went about, I maybe had a group of six people where I worked really, really hard on that and I realized that's probably not my superpower. And some of them are still really close friends today, but the amount of work for me to make

a group cohesive is very high for people for whom it isn't work at all. It's just natural and inherent in them. Those seem very rare. Do you have any data or thoughts? How common are these super connectors?

Dr. Jamil Zaki (00:57:36):

Well, they are relatively rare, but Charles Duhig, my friend and author of this great book, super communicators, would argue that any of us could become super communicators with the right effort. Now, he wouldn't say it's easy, but he would say there are techniques that we can use in our interactions that I'd say actually connect a lot with hopeful skepticism. Things like being really curious about others asking. He find it super communicators ask 10 times more questions than the average person that they validate, and they try to draw out themes in the comments that multiple people are making during a conversation, trying to actively generate connection and deepen communication in real time. Again, I think this takes work and maybe it's easier for some people than others as a default, but Charles would argue strenuously that if we want to be better connectors, we can work at that.

Dave Asprey (00:58:38):

I know we're running up on the end of the time you have available. Final question for you, Jamon. Your book is hope for cynics, and I got to ask you this, if you could feel as good as you do now or better, how long would you want to live?

Dr. Jamil Zaki (00:58:59):

I mean, that's a profound question. You mean I could choose centuries? I could choose to, as long as you feel as good. Well, we're

Dave Asprey (00:59:10):

Right at the cusp of this being possible.

Dr. Jamil Zaki (00:59:12):

Yeah, I mean it's so difficult to answer because the animal inside me says forever. No animal wants to die. And so that's a knee-jerk response. I guess my second follow-up question would be, does everybody else get to do it with me? I would not want to live centuries and centuries if it meant watching my children and grandchildren themselves age and die.

Dave Asprey (00:59:38):

You don't have a right to force other people to live longer than they want to.

Dr. Jamil Zaki (00:59:43):

But if they had the choice with me,

Dave Asprey (00:59:45):

I believe we're building this for our species and some people are going to do it, some people aren't.

Dr. Jamil Zaki (00:59:51):

Wow. Well, it would be a lot longer than the current life expectancy, let me say

Dave Asprey (00:59:55):

That. Yeah.

Dr. Jamil Zaki (00:59:57):
How about you?

Dave Asprey (00:59:58):
My number is at least 180 because our current best is one 20. We have a hundred years to do 50% better. I think I'm being super conservative and I've been in the longevity movement for 25 years, and I just reset my central aging clock using stem cells in my hypothalamus, and I've done gene therapy and I know this is happening. It's ridiculous what's possible, but it raises the question if you're not cynical and you're aware of the world, my answer, that's my kind of number answer, but my real answer is I'd like to die at a time and by a method of my choosing. So when I'm done, I'm done. Because I don't think, even though my animal parts would like to live forever, I don't think that would be good for me from a happiness perspective. And there will be a time when there's no more interesting problems and there's nothing else I want to learn. And I'm like, I'm done. But I think it might be centuries and I'm open to that. I'm also open to tomorrow going, maybe I'm done. There's just a sense of freedom in that.

Dr. Jamil Zaki (01:01:05):
That's beautifully put.

Dave Asprey (01:01:07):
If you're cynical though, you can't make that choice. And that's why I think your book is so powerful. And guys, I know Jim has to run. Just hope for cynic. If you're feeling cynical or just distrustful and angry, read the book. There's so much science. Humans are actually good. And yes, there are some people who are bad people, but there are far fewer than it feels. And all you have to do is learn how to spot 'em or have people around you who can spot 'em, and there's a quality of life that you would never believe and this book will teach you that. So hope for cynics. Is there a URL people should go to find the book?

Dr. Jamil Zaki (01:01:41):
Yeah, Jamil Zaki is my website and I'm really easy to find and hope for Cynics is available everywhere you get

Dave Asprey (01:01:50):
Books. Jamil, your work is awesome. Next time I'm in the Bay Area, let's hang out.

Dr. Jamil Zaki (01:01:55):
Please. I would love that.

Dave Asprey (01:01:57):
Alright, thank you my friend. Thanks.