

The Great Simplification

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[00:00:00] **Anna Lembke:** All of these kind of seeking behaviors. If we don't have a proper healthy outlet for them, they're going to get redirected to a, a sort of a neurotic, destructive kind of behavior. And I never go to zoos like I, to me, zoos are one of the most depressing places in the world because you see this kind of neurotic pacing really like weird behavior because that's not a natural environment for an animal.

[00:00:26] And really, we're animals. We've put ourselves in these cages. And as a result, I really think we're all neurotic and mentally ill. And our advancing scientific and technological creations in the world have essentially changed the face of the planet, such that now this ancient wiring is mismatched for our modern ecosystem.

[00:00:47] And that is why we all struggle.

[00:00:54] **Nate Hagens:** Today I am pleased to be joined by Anna Lemke, who is a clinical psychiatrist and also the author of Dopamine Nation, finding Balance in the Age of Indulgence, to discuss with me how our cultural relationship with dopamine and addiction might impact the coming great Simplification. Anna is a professor of psychiatry at Stanford University School of Medicine and Chief of the Stanford Addiction Medicine Doula Diagnosis Clinic.

[00:01:23] As a clinician scholar, she has published more than a hundred peer reviewed papers, book chapters, and commentaries. She also sits on the board of several state and national addiction focused organizations, has testified before various committees in the United States Congress and maintains a thriving clinical practice.

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[00:01:41] This episode is jam packed with information, including how and why people get addicted, much of which I didn't know before. Anna also explains why our modern environments are so conducive to hijacking our dopamine reward systems, as well as some of the ways that we can reclaim them. One of the things I most worry about both now and as we face more and more challenges in the future is the ability for people to regain and maintain their mental health.

[00:02:10] Perhaps this conversation with Anna might help some of us start down that path, including yours. Truly, before we begin, if you are enjoying this podcast, I invite you to subscribe to our substack newsletter where you can read more of the system science underpinning the human predicament, where my team and I increasingly share written content related to The Great Simplification.

[00:02:32] You can find the link to subscribe in the show description. With that, please welcome Anna Lemke. Anna Lemke, welcome to the program.

[00:02:43] **Anna Lembke:** Thank you for inviting me. I'm super excited to be here.

[00:02:45] **Nate Hagens:** So I'm not sure exactly where to, to start this, because we've had this scheduled for like six months, and you're one of the best known names in the world of dopamine and addiction and really need very little introduction.

[00:02:59] In addition to being a professor of psychiatry, a practicing psychiatrist, you've also become a leading advocate of balancing our relationship with the neurotransmitter dopamine, um, highlighted in your book, dopamine Nation. And so I, I think, I don't want to take a, like, what is dopamine basics? Uh, so much as, as look at how your work intersects with the broader challenges we face as a culture and a species and.

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[00:03:30] I have like a hundred questions. Great. So let, let's just start with an observation that I had last week when I was on a walk in a local park and it was stunning with fall colors and there was birds and squirrel and deer scrapes and, and it was just magical and it's kind of my sacred place. Um, or one of them.

[00:03:50] And I passed two people who were also walking, but they were totally engrossed with their phones. Uh, both of them. Given I had this upcoming podcast with you, it made me wonder what is going on here? Why these people would prefer the stimulation from their phones rather than absorbing this moment in nature.

[00:04:09] Or do they prefer it or, or do their values even have a say? So maybe we could start and you could offer some insight and what precisely is going on in the brain to cause that behavior and preference in that, in that setting?

[00:04:22] **Anna Lembke:** Well, what you described there is just such a great example of how we are not showing up for our lives, which is really a mystery, right?

[00:04:31] I mean, we, we value our lives. Nobody wants to die, and yet we're not, you know, we're not present for our lives. And what I argue in Domine Nation is that essentially. We have drug ified. Our lived experience by making everything more rewarding, more potent, more accessible, more bountiful, more novel, um, such that we're all vulnerable to addiction, not just to drugs and alcohol, but also behaviors including engagement with digital media.

[00:05:03] It's very clear that digital media activates the same reward pathway as drugs and alcohol. It releases dopamine in the reward pathway. The more dopamine that's released and the faster that it's released, the more likely is that substance or behavior to be reinforcing for our brains. And digital media is just like our reward pathways turned inside out.

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[00:05:26] It is this medium that absolutely an instantly captivates us without. Any learning curve necessary. It has all of the, uh, technological affordances, also known as dynamic design features that make something addictive. Um, starting with, it's highly accessible. You can access digital media anywhere, anytime from your phone.

[00:05:47] It's highly boun. TikTok essentially never runs out. The more we expose our brains to these reinforcing stimuli, the more we are likely to become addicted. It is highly interactive and it's this interactive aspect where through our behavior and engagement, we actually change the platform and change the technology through like shares comments, plus the algorithm learns who we are.

[00:06:13] Then knows what to give us to maintain that engagement. Plus injecting just a little bit of the unexpected to keep us from getting bored. And essentially, you then have an, you know, a runaway train of a highly reinforcing, highly addictive medium. And you know, as far as I'm concerned, we don't need any other studies to show us that digital media in Alts, Barry's forms is addictive.

[00:06:38] You just need to go to the park and, and look around.

[00:06:42] **Nate Hagens:** So, well, here's the thing. Uh, longtime viewers know that I have so many questions and it with a guest like you, that this is in the core of my wheelhouse. You, you don't know this. Well, I, I've never said this before, but. When I was on Wall Street before I quit, I was reading papers by Wolfram Schultz on, on dopamine and unexpected, uh, reward like 25 years ago before I got my PhD.

[00:07:09] Peter, we Brow, who wrote, um, American Mania, was an early person on my PhD committee. So I, I really, 25 years ago saw that, um, neurotransmitters and our evolved tendencies were at the heart of what I call the human or more

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than human predicament. Um, so yeah, it's, it's, it's unraveling and, and happening in real time.

[00:07:33] You mentioned social media. Um, I assume the same dynamic you just described applies to AI and chatbots.

[00:07:42] **Anna Lembke:** Yeah. I mean, I actually use the word digital media and not social media, and I, I did that with intention because for me it's all reinforcing, you know, depending upon our particular neurological wiring, our background, that will determine our drug of choice.

[00:07:57] To me, digital media is the bigger umbrella and then subsumed within that, you've got social media, you've got pornography, video games, online shopping, and now you know, the sort of uber potent form of social media is ai.

[00:08:10] **Nate Hagens:** What would happen if one of our ancestors from the Pleistocene 10, 15,000 years ago was dropped into San Francisco or New York and had at their access porn and fantasy football and social media and online shopping, uh, what could you hypothesize?

[00:08:31] **Anna Lembke:** I think it would take them probably five minutes to get addicted.

[00:08:35] **Nate Hagens:** Really?

[00:08:36] **Anna Lembke:** Yeah. I do. I mean, I, it, it's fascinating when you look at, so. When you look at human evolution, you know, our brains essentially evolve for a world of scarcity and ever present danger, where we would have to do a lot of upfront work for a tiny little bit of reward.

[00:08:55] That is how we're designed. Dopamine is not only linked to reward, it's also our movement neurotransmitter. That's no coincidence, right? Um, and.

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What's happened is essentially we've now created an environment that is mismatched for our ancient wiring where we don't have to do any work at all, and we're flooded and get a huge reward.

[00:09:15] **Nate Hagens:** Yeah. Yeah. We're

[00:09:15] **Anna Lembke:** flooded and, and I, and, and those, those individuals, you know, who haven't, like, at least in the US we've had sort of a slower development in terms of like the industrial and technological e you know, revolution. We've sort of generationally had a little more time to get accustomed to all of this abundance and this stratified world.

[00:09:39] But, you know, the, the, the most vulnerable people on the wor in the world are to some degree emerging economies who overnight have this kind of instantaneous wealth without the slow succession of generations to habituate to it. And, you know, who's like. Genetics and epigenetics are even less well equipped to adapt to, to these, uh, highly reinforcing, uh, substances and behaviors.

[00:10:05] **Nate Hagens:** So you, um, your book was called Dopamine Nation, presumably about the United States, but this is a, this is a global species level problem now. Yes.

[00:10:14] **Anna Lembke:** Yes. Absolutely. I mean, it could, it could have been called dopamine nations. I do mention Okay. Other countries. Yeah.

[00:10:19] **Nate Hagens:** Yeah. Well, dopamine nations got a nice ring to it.

[00:10:22] Yes. So, so back, back to our ancestors.

[00:10:25] **Anna Lembke:** Yes,

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[00:10:25] **Nate Hagens:** of course we can find skulls, but not brains. So this is just speculation. But if we had a functional MRI machine or able to track our modern behavior, and you see the dopamine throughout the day, the neurons firing in an average American relative to the ancestral past.

[00:10:47] You said that historically we did a lot of work and we got a little reward like was dopamine not? A constant companion, and we had a lot more serotonin and oxytocin and, um, norepinephrine and, and all the, all the other things. But now it's the dominant neurotransmitter in our days or was, were our, did our ancestors have also lots of dopamine?

[00:11:12] They were just using it to find good things to eat and, and stay away from danger.

[00:11:19] **Anna Lembke:** Yeah. I mean, so obviously we we're speculating here because we, we don't actually have, you know, the brains to compare. But I, I would say it's more the latter. It's, it's not like, first of all, dopamine is not the only neurotransmitter involved in the process of pleasure, reward, and motivation.

[00:11:36] It, it's, there are multiple complex chemical cascades. It's just that for that, that neuroscientists in the last 75 years or so have identified a dedicated reward pathway and identified dopamine. As a very strong signal in that pathway. Not the only signal, but just a very dominant signal that registers for the organism.

[00:11:59] Oh, this is something that, uh, I should approach and explore and potentially get more of. And it's become a kind of common currency for neuroscientists to measure the reinforcing potential of different substances and behavior. So, for example, um, you know, they put a, a probe in the nucleus accumbens, which is a dedicated part of the reward pathway, uh, in, in the brain, including in the rat brain.

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[00:12:26] And they measure dopamine levels, and we're always kind of releasing dopamine in the nucleus accumbens at a baseline tonic level. And then they saw how much dopamine firing increased above baseline in response to a variety of rewards. So for rats, you know, dopamine firing, firing will increase 55% above baseline in response to chocolate, a hundred percent for sex, 150% for nicotine, 200% for cocaine, and a thousand percent for amphetamine.

[00:12:54] And that maps pretty well onto how hard a rat is willing to work to get that drug. IE how, how, how, how many times they'll press a lever per minute or per hour to get that drug, which is one of the ways to measure addiction. So it's kind of, it, it's one of the best animal models that we have for any mental health disorder.

[00:13:14] For example, for depression, our animal animal model is like a swim test, which is really kind of orthogonal to depression. But how much, you know, I'm willing to press a lever for cocaine maps pretty well onto the human experience of like, how much time, energy, creativity, money am I willing to spend to get my drug?

[00:13:31] **Nate Hagens:** So you've mentioned drug, uh, several times. What's the definition of a drug? Because in some ways, neurotransmitters, I mean, life is a drug in some sense, but we don't abuse it the way that we abuse digital media.

[00:13:44] **Anna Lembke:** Yeah. So I mean, when I use the word drug, I, I am using it broadly, but not as broadly as you just used it.

[00:13:52] So I'm talking about something that has, uh, the potential for addiction, something that's an intoxicant is essentially what I'm talking about. But, but drugs, drug, that term is also used, you know, for medications that are not necessarily reinforcing. Um, so, you know, it's in this context, what I'm saying is it's something that.

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[00:14:10] HA releases a lot of dopamine all at once in the nucleus. Accumbens is reinforcing for the individual and has high potential for addiction. And that can include not just things we ingest, um, but behaviors as well. So gambling, sex, shopping, video games, social media, you know, engaging with my AI avatar who keeps validating and reinforcing my worldview every 10 seconds.

[00:14:35] Um, you know, it's, it's all of those things. And typically something that is something that has the potential for addiction is tied in some way to what we call a natural reward. Natural rewards are the things that kept us alive, finding food, clothing, shelter, a mate. Those are typically what we think of as the natural rewards.

[00:14:54] Addictive substances and behaviors are things that mimic or closely align with those natural reward or a chemical that mimics those natural rewards or the cascade in our minds.

[00:15:06] **Nate Hagens:** That makes sense. Um. You know, I'm, I'm wearing the hat, the hat of a podcast host, uh, today. And, uh, it might be a different conversation with the camera off when I engage you with your psychiatry expertise, but we'll, we'll keep that for another day.

[00:15:24] So, um, since you wrote your book, uh, public Awareness of Dopamine has exploded, including through popularization of phrases like dopamine, fasts, and dopamine addiction, what would you say, Anna, is, is one of the biggest misconceptions that you've seen popularized when it comes to dopamine?

[00:15:45] **Anna Lembke:** Yeah. So when we abstain from our drug of choice for a period of time, we're, we're not actually abstaining from dopamine.

[00:15:52] Mm-hmm. We're abstaining from substances or behaviors that. Release a lot of dopamine all at once in our brain, thereby confusing our brains and, and

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leading to this process of neuroadaptation, which then leads to tolerance, needing more of our drug in more potent forms over time to get the same effect.

[00:16:09] And we're abstaining in part to reset, uh, dopamine wire, you know, firing so that we can get back, uh, our original experience with that drug potentially, or get, get back the ability to take joy in other more modest rewards. So that's the first thing. And likewise, dopamine addiction. We're, we're not addicted to dopamine.

[00:16:30] Dopamine is not good or bad. And when we, you know, if I were to give you a spoonful of dopamine, it would actually do absolutely nothing 'cause it doesn't cross the blood brain barrier. Um, I'd have to give you L-dopa, a precursor that would be converted dopamine in your brain. But we're not actually ingesting dopamine when we are consuming addictive substances or engaging in addictive behaviors, or we're doing is, we're.

[00:16:53] Triggering a complex chemical cascade, which is different for every drug and every behavior, but all of which ultimately leads to the release of dopamine in the reward pathway, which again, is just something that we can measure or neuroscientists can measure. And so again, it's become this kind of way of measuring, but we're not addicted to dopamine.

[00:17:15] We're not fasting from dopamine. It's just a way of looking at, um, you know, how the brain has adapted to these intoxicants and how over time they essentially stop working and we have to then continue to up the ante. Plus we narrow our focus such that we're no longer interested in other rewards. We just want this one thing.

[00:17:38] **Nate Hagens:** So from a historical perspective, it's not like we're we alive today are weak or flawed. Any of our roughly a hundred billion homo sapiens ancestors who have ever lived, would've been susceptible to the technology that

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we, and the culture and the, the aspirations and what's publicly acceptable. It's just that the techno, we're not strong enough, most of us, unless we really do the work which we're gonna get into, to, uh, resist the siren song of the super normal stimuli that surrounds us.

[00:18:12] **Anna Lembke:** Yeah, that's exactly right. And it's a really important point. It's, we, we are slaves to our surroundings. We all have pretty much the same kind of reward pathway that works in the same way. It's also not just conserved across evolution, but across species. We reflexively approach pleasure and avoid pain that has, is what has kept us alive over these many, many centuries and.

[00:18:38] Our advancing. Scientific and technological, you know, creations in the world have essentially changed the face of the planet, such that now this ancient wiring is mismatched for our modern ecosystem. And that is why we all struggle.

[00:18:54] **Nate Hagens:** My staff is gonna roll their eyes for me, um, asking this question, but I have a 12-year-old, uh, Dotson.

[00:19:00] Jack Russell, named Frank, is a wonderful dog, but in the last three years, he has developed a compulsion slash addiction. I don't know, but every night when we're gonna watch Netflix or, or whatever, he, he must find a cardboard box somewhere in the house and bring it, and bring it up on the couch and shred it.

[00:19:20] And if fascinating, and if he can't find it, he, he will go ballistic until you give him a cardboard Yeah. Uh, box. So can other animals, uh, you know, either are domesticate or wild animals, have dopamine addictions in, in the same way that you're discussing?

[00:19:35] **Anna Lembke:** First of all, that's so fascinating. I, I have, there is a guy who's like a dog whisper trainer type guy who reached out to me, who read

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Dopamine Nation and was like, you know, a lot of the calls that I get from people struggling with their animals is because they've gotten their animals addicted.

[00:19:52] And one of the example that he, he gives is like, you know, 'cause everyone gives their animals all these treats for doing this or that, but one of them was like, um, you know, you think throwing a ball for a dog, how, how could that be harmful? Like, what a great dog owner? But apparently you can do it in a way where your dog can get completely obsessed with the ball and then if you don't throw the ball or they can't find the ball, they just go nuts.

[00:20:13] So I, I don't know exactly what's going on with your dog, but yes, these sorts of, um, compulsive, let's even call them neurotic behaviors. Um, and you know, Freud, Freud defined neurosis as the thing that we keep doing over and over again, expecting a different outcome and not getting it, you know, all of these kind of.

[00:20:31] Seeking behaviors. If we don't have a proper healthy outlet for them, uh, they're going to get redirected to a, a sort of a neurotic, potentially, uh, destructive, uh, kind of behavior. And, you know, you can see this, I mean, just staying on the animal theme, you know, you see this, I never go to zoos. Like, to me, zoos are one of the most depressing places in the world because you see this kind of neurotic pacing or paw gnawing or just like, really like weird behavior because that's not, that's not a natural environment for an animal.

[00:21:07] An animal is supposed to go hunt for its own food. And really, we're animals, we're not that different. And we've built our own cages. We've put ourselves in these cages. And as a result, I really think we're all like neurotic and mentally ill.

[00:21:24] **Nate Hagens:** I agree with you and I, I think the, the perception shift is.

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[00:21:31] We're going through the motions that everyone else is, but the perception shift is what you just said. If we realize we're in a cage and these are the things that are metaphorically making us pace in an unhealthy way, does knowledge about this stuff give us any power over changing it?

[00:21:52] **Anna Lembke:** Knowledge is very important.

[00:21:55] I mean, knowledge can open a window into. Wanting to change things if you don't have the idea of it, and especially a shared knowledge. So when people share a powerful idea, I think that can change the world. But obviously, you know, knowledge is not enough. I mean, it has to be linked to, also to behavior change, to changing our environment, to acknowledging the limitations, you know, of, of what knowledge will do.

[00:22:25] Um, but yeah, I, I do think that ideas are, are really powerful.

[00:22:29] **Nate Hagens:** So a lot of people toss around the word addiction, uh, possibly without really understanding what it means. Can you explain the point at which an individual human. Becomes addicted to something in contrast to them just doing it often and really enjoying it.

[00:22:46] And is there a gray area between healthy consumption of digital media or sports or shopping and full-blown addiction? And are there healthy addictions, um, such as bike riding? In my case.

[00:23:01] **Anna Lembke:** Great question. So addiction is a brain disease marked by distinct pathophysiologic changes in the brain. But as of yet, we have no brain scan or blood test to diagnose addiction.

[00:23:11] We base it on phenomenology, which is patterns of behavior that are very recognizable and repeat themselves across temperaments, time periods,

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cultures, et cetera. Addiction is a spectrum disorder. Um, so you can be a little bit addicted, moderately addicted, and a lot addicted. You can also be pre addicted where you're, you know, beginning to manifest some maladaptive compulsive over consumption behaviors, but maybe you haven't quite crossed into the threshold.

[00:23:37] And how do we know when people have crossed that threshold? It's a judgment call. That's what, you know, psychiatrists and other mental healthcare providers, you know, get paid to do. But it essentially comes down to whether or not. That behavior now has consequences for the individual and or for other people.

[00:23:53] And that's, by the way, I think, important to qualify how we diagnose every single mental health disorder has it crossed into consequences. You know, we have other criteria outta control use, compulsive use craving, but really it's the continued use to spike consequences that really it is the hallmark of addiction.

[00:24:12] **Nate Hagens:** Could you just speculate, although of anyone in the world, you might be the best to speculate on this question, or among the best, what percentage of our society either the United States are globally, are in the pre addicted, mildly addicted, moderately addicted or severely addicted category? Just roughly.

[00:24:31] **Anna Lembke:** I mean, I would put like 99% of us in the pre addicted. Like I, I do believe we're all, if you really, if you count the way we engage with our. Digital devices and digital media.

[00:24:42] **Nate Hagens:** I'm more than pre addicted.

[00:24:43] **Anna Lembke:** Okay. A anybo. But I would say anybody who, who's, who's got a digital device and engages digital media is struggling.

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[00:24:50] Yeah. Um, and I, so, so, you know, you, whether you wanna call it 95 or 99, because I think maybe there are a few percentage of people who don't have, have devices. So, you know, my husband's one of them and he's maybe one of the few people who's not actually addicted. Yeah. He's amazing. Um. But you know, in terms of actually crossing the threshold, I mean, we, we have numbers for alcohol.

[00:25:12] There's about 10 to 15%, uh, lifetime prevalence for alcohol use disorder in the United States. It varies, you know, country to country. Uh, for drug use disorders, it's about 10% lifetime prevalence for behavioral addictions. We actually don't have good numbers. Like there's a huge and growing problem of online pornography and compulsive masturbation addiction, especially among men and boys.

[00:25:36] We do not have good numbers, but it's a big number. Um, you know, shopping addiction affects more women. We don't have good numbers, but it's, it's growing. Um, you know, you got social media, you got video games, you got all these things now, and now you even have people getting addicted to stuff that we typically think of as healthy, like exercise, because now we're counting ourselves and we're all wired up and we're on leaderboards.

[00:25:58] Or even, like, I talk about my addiction to romance novels, which, you know, it was like. A mild type of thing. It wasn't life-threatening. I don't mean to like trivialize life-threatening addiction by comparing it to romance novels, but I can tell you it was the acquisition of a Kindle, my e-reader and the access to unlimited, practically free romance novels that like really turned me into a chain reader, which I hadn't been before.

[00:26:22] Which meant I was also, you know, reading at work in between patients, reading late into the night reading contrary to my values, right? And then like had this sort of this wake up call like, oh wait, what am I doing?

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[00:26:33] **Nate Hagens:** Well, here's a dumb question.

[00:26:35] **Anna Lembke:** There aren't any dumb questions

[00:26:36] **Nate Hagens:** especially since I've never read a romance novel.

[00:26:38] Don't un unless you call like the Hobbit, uh, a romance novel from a fantasy source. There are no

[00:26:45] **Anna Lembke:** women in the Hobbit. That's true. I mean, guess it could still be a romance novel, but yeah. That,

[00:26:49] **Nate Hagens:** but as a, as a psychiatrist who knows this stuff and how dopamine works after you've read five or six romance novels, isn't the unexpected reward kind of missing 'cause you know where things are going?

[00:27:01] **Anna Lembke:** Such a great question. So. You know, addiction is really only a little bit about pleasure and reward. What it ultimately becomes about is control. It's narrowing the scope of my experience down to this tiny little action perception loop that I can 100% predict where it's going and how it's gonna make me feel.

[00:27:30] And that's where I feel safe because I'm suddenly not having to deal with this world of chaos out here.

[00:27:36] **Nate Hagens:** I didn't know that.

[00:27:38] **Anna Lembke:** Yeah.

[00:27:39] **Nate Hagens:** So it's, so, it's the, uh, when someone chooses. To do an addictive behavior, whatever it is, check their phones or porn or gambling, uh, or shopping. It's in that little moment that despite all the metris, human

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predicament, polarization, politics, climate change in the world, in that moment, they can control something a hundred percent.

[00:28:04] And that gives them agency or comfort or what's going on.

[00:28:07] **Anna Lembke:** Yeah, I mean, there, it's, it's fascinating because it's, it's not controlling it a hundred percent, but it's, I can press the lever and immediately, 'cause the timing is important. Immediately it will change the way I feel. Now, I might not actually feel better, but I will feel.

[00:28:26] Control that some action that I did changed my experience. And that is ultimately what sucks us in.

[00:28:34] **Nate Hagens:** So does it stand to reason, and I imagine there's some research on this, that when people are stressed, uh, or, um, have financial problems or are worried about the future and, and are, uh, undergoing dread and fear, is it more likely, are they more susceptible to become addicted to some technology or behavior with that starting point?

[00:29:00] **Anna Lembke:** Absolutely. That's very well documented. So stress, trauma, uh, massive social and cultural dislocation, uh, unemployment, poverty, uh, those are all huge risk factors for addiction.

[00:29:14] **Nate Hagens:** So it's even more important your, your work for the future that, that, um, I'm expecting we're, we're. Headed towards, um, to have some ownership of this.

[00:29:27] And, um, I had a, um,

[00:29:30] **Anna Lembke:** uh, wait, can you answer a question for me though about Sure. Your Superorganism theory. Yeah. Yeah. So is it, is it your idea that we are inevitably headed toward the great. Simplification or is it that if we change

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what we do now and have greater awareness and, and change these, this, these, this pattern of the Superorganism that we can avoid The Great Simplification.

[00:29:54] **Nate Hagens:** Thank you. Um, that's an excellent question. Had you asked me that five years ago, I might have given a different answer. Um, I believe it is in some form, in inevitable, in, in many ways it's already here. It's just not evenly distributed. I believe the only way out is, is through. And I think in complex systems you can't, one, once there's a phase shift and a peak, you can't predict what's gonna happen.

[00:30:18] But I think, uh, wider and deeper poverty and. Um, temperatures increasing by the decade and different, uh, um, fraying of the social contract, um, and energy becoming, uh, available still, but scarcer and, and more costly and how that ripples through our economies. I think it's largely inevitable. The timing and the severity are unknown, but we already see it.

[00:30:47] Um, and, and part of the story of the Superorganism isn't the biophysical macro, it's actually the cultural zeitgeist and how we already feel. That we're living kind of in a dystopian culture.

[00:31:03] **Anna Lembke:** Yeah.

[00:31:03] **Nate Hagens:** Uh, I mean, it's, it's really a mammalian, uh, social primate version of the famous Rat Park study, which I'm sure you've discussed and are, are, are aware of.

[00:31:13] I do think it is a energetic ecological metabolism that our species has been riding this wave, which I refer to as a carbon pulse. By the way, I don't think I sent you my long form video, uh, 30 minute, uh, animated movie called The Great Simplification. But one of the lines in there is we're churning billions of barrels of ancient sunlight into microliters of

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[00:31:39] **Anna Lembke:** dopamine.

[00:31:39] Mm-hmm. Great. Yeah.

[00:31:41] **Nate Hagens:** Yeah. I wonder what you thought of that.

[00:31:42] **Anna Lembke:** Yeah, I that, I mean, that really resonates. That's right. That's, it's, you know, I, it's, I was talking to somebody recently where somehow, you know, we got on the topic of ai, of course, and, um. You know, and this idea that's gonna take over. And I said, you know, the, the fear is not that ai that there's gonna be some kind of AI hostile takeover.

[00:32:06] The fear is that we will succumb, we will give away our agency. We will, we will willingly, you know, walk toward that kind of, uh, you know, loss of who we are.

[00:32:20] **Nate Hagens:** Yeah. There's a lot of risks, uh, with, with AI and, and there the we is important because I think even the heads of the open, uh, of the big AI companies think there is some sort of a risk of a AI apocalypse on your, in your domain, though I'm quite.

[00:32:38] Worried about cognitive atrophy and Right. You know, the movie you were in with Tristan, the social dilemma talked about, um, that the social media companies are hijacking our, uh, attention. Right. But now AI is hijacking our attachment, especially with chatbots and such. Yes. So it's a, um, it's a really perilous world out there with, with the technology and I think most people don't really want it.

[00:33:08] And yet the same as those people I passed in the woods. It's, it's a compulsion. You're getting the very little, uh, um, effort to get a ton of what our brain thinks we're, we're, we're winning in our tribal ancestral past.

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[00:33:23] **Anna Lembke:** Yeah. I mean, I, you know, I've. For a long time said that these devices are essentially our masturbation machines.

[00:33:30] And I, I, I don't, I mean that, you know, quite literally, um, you know, as I talk about, I had a patient who built a masturbation machine. He had a sex and pornography, a masturbation addiction, but it. It didn't take me long at all to realize that our digital devices serve the same function. We are titillating ourselves, getting increasingly getting all of our needs met through these machines.

[00:33:52] And AI is just, you know, the quintessential example of that. A and as a result, we are not turning toward other people to meet those needs, and that is the crucial divide. That is, that is what will kill us in the end.

[00:34:06] **Nate Hagens:** I have so many questions. So first of all, on, on that one, uh, two questions. One part of the problem is it seems still.

[00:34:14] Even after the success of the social dilemma and other things, it's totally culturally accepted. What if we, amongst ourselves in our boardrooms and company picnics and family reunions and all those things referred to these devices as masturbation machines, thereby kind of removing the social license, that they're cool and helpful.

[00:34:38] Would that do anything?

[00:34:39] **Anna Lembke:** Oh, that's interesting. Yeah, that's a good idea. But what I, the way I talk about this is just talking about digital etiquette. So right now we don't really have any digital etiquette, etiquette. You know, you, you know, you see, you can see a, a 1-year-old playing on their parents' iPhone.

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[00:34:55] I think we need to get to a place where people would be horrified by that. You know, that, that, that a parent would give a small child their a screen.

[00:35:03] **Nate Hagens:** It's effectively giving them. Cocaine or amphetamines. Exactly. Yeah. And, and,

[00:35:07] **Anna Lembke:** and, and we need to, we need to see it that way as a culture, I think we're slowly, slowly, possibly heading in that direction.

[00:35:16] Right. Number one, I mean, I've been talking about getting smartphones outta schools for going on 20 years. It's actually happening now, which is amazing. Yeah. I really didn't think I'd see the day. Um, you know, you have young people, these Luddite groups where they're getting off social media, you know, gathering without devices and they mean it, like they're not just, they're not, it's not just for the moment.

[00:35:37] These people, they're committed and they're young and, and they're the ones who are, you know, weaned on this stuff. So I I, and parents, I tell you, parents are really the groundswell of wanting to have a healthier relationship with, with. Devices and with technology, you know, someone like me, you know, from a professional position, I can go on and on, but it's when the parents like became the army.

[00:36:04] That that's powerful.

[00:36:06] **Nate Hagens:** Do you know Jonathan Het?

[00:36:07] **Anna Lembke:** Oh yes.

[00:36:08] **Nate Hagens:** Yeah. He's been on the show. Um, and he's been working a lot on, on what he just said. He has done

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[00:36:13] **Anna Lembke:** yeoman's work. Yes.

[00:36:15] **Nate Hagens:** Yeah. So, um, back to the masturbation machines. Yeah. Uh, example. So when I taught college, um, I forgot the video, but I assigned my students something about porn, uh, addiction so that they could understand what happens, that especially men, um, when they get used to porn, they can no longer actually.

[00:36:38] Perform when they're with a real human being. So extrapolating that to the broader social landscape, not just with porn, but with all the other things that we become addicted to with technology, presumably it, it, it, it matches, right? We're harming our real relationships because we have this such high supernormal stimuli bar that we're accessing all the time.

[00:37:04] **Anna Lembke:** Yes, exactly. Uh, it's an individual problem. It's an interpersonal problem. It's a societal and collective problem. And, you know, once we get to that place where we're constantly stimulating our brains with these reinforcing substances and behaviors all day long, we essentially experience anhedonia, which is the inability to take any pleasure in anything at all.

[00:37:24] Right. Because we've changed our threshold.

[00:37:26] **Nate Hagens:** It is, I, I hate to ask you this, but as your follow-up book, uh, might be titled Anhedonia Nation.

[00:37:33] **Anna Lembke:** No, because, you know, ultimately I'm. I'm an optimistic person and I feel like I said the sort of like, here's the bad news and here's what you as an individual can do, armed with this knowledge to combat this.

[00:37:49] And I believe that, um, no, I'm, I'm actually working on a book on spirituality because. I think ultimately we need to develop a new spirituality, um,

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you know, informed by all of the ancient spiritual traditions that have to do with Yeah, how do we care for each other and the, and the planet essentially.

[00:38:07] **Nate Hagens:** I'm not a spiritual person.

[00:38:09] Uh, my cathedral is old growth forest and, and being out. That's a cathedral.

[00:38:14] **Anna Lembke:** You're a spiritual person.

[00:38:16] **Nate Hagens:** Okay, well, I meant in the conventional sense. Yeah. But I've arrived at the same place, Anna. I I think that's where the, the phase shift for our culture lies somehow. Um, yeah. So, um, what get, getting back to addiction, and by the way, when you finish that book, I hope, I hope you'll come back on the show and you, and share what share you're learning.

[00:38:38] Yeah. What are the warning signs of addiction that someone watching or listening to this could look out for in themselves and, and others?

[00:38:47] **Anna Lembke:** Well, the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders has 11 criteria. If you meet two of those 11 criteria, you meet threshold criteria for having an addiction.

[00:38:57] Those criteria can simply be, uh, summed up as the four C's plus tolerance and withdrawal. The four C's are outta control, use, craving, compulsions, and continued use despite consequences. Uh, tolerance means finding that your drug stops working at a given dose or that you need more overtime to get the same effect.

[00:39:18] Withdrawal means that when you try to stop, you have an actual physiologic, uh, painful response.

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[00:39:24] **Nate Hagens:** Uh, I probably don't want to admit this publicly, but Sunday mornings my phone gives me like a update, and it's like right around five hours a week. I use my, uh, um, five hours a day. I, I'm on my phone. Okay. Uh, which.

[00:39:38] Probably hits all the Cs I'm, I'm guessing. Yeah. But unfortunately, five years ago I was not that way. It's this job. Uh, and like I don't post, I don't have a Facebook account anymore. I mean, it's still there, but I have to have social media accounts for this work to use our friend Tristan's, uh, phrase. I'm using the devil's tools to do Gaia's work, and yet, but I'm still, but I'm still addicted in the process.

[00:40:04] **Anna Lembke:** Yeah. And this is a huge problem. You know, I, I, there some people talk about like invisible ai or is there a point at which, you know, the, we can get the machines in the background doing the work that we need to get done to make the planet go round in all the usual ways, but where we're actually, you know, not engaging with the platforms and we have time to, you know, interact with each other or do other more laudable things.

[00:40:31] I mean, I hope that's what happens. I'm, I'm not super optimistic given the direction things are. Going, because the medium is in and of itself, so reinforcing and so pleasurable and, and full of so many illusions. The illusion of connection, the illusion of getting work done when no work is happening and no connection is happening.

[00:40:51] Um, you know, we lose time when we're engaged and we love to lose time because it feels good we are out of our bodies and out of our minds and all that stuff.

[00:40:59] **Nate Hagens:** So we'll get to your prescriptions and, and advice, uh, later in this conversation. For, for my part, um. I recognize that I'm addicted. Right. Um, part of it out of necessity.

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[00:41:11] So I've come up with the idea of digital offsets. You've heard of carbon offsets, right? But digital offsets is, I have to do this, I have to use this technology. Yeah. Whether it's a chat bot to do research or social media, but then I leave my phone at home and I go for an hour, uh, hike with the dogs, or I go on a bike ride and it's like, this is my, this is the, this is what I have to do to be able to do this.

[00:41:35] And I've created a little routine of that, but I'm still an addict.

[00:41:38] **Anna Lembke:** Yeah. So that's, that's very interesting. So you're literally trying to do like this balance by pressing on the pleasure side and then intentionally pressing on the pain side. What

[00:41:47] **Nate Hagens:** do you mean by the pain side?

[00:41:49] **Anna Lembke:** By doing things that are hard.

[00:41:50] Oh, yeah. You know, by doing hard things, um, and. Also, you're also using a sort of auto corrected contingency management, which we use a lot to treat addiction, which means, uh, you use punishments and rewards commensurate with the transgression to shape behavior. And it works.

[00:42:09] **Nate Hagens:** In my case, I wouldn't call it, uh, pain unless you mean Yeah.

[00:42:12] Like, 'cause I love to ride bikes and I love to go for walks with my dog. The pain would all only be, I'm not getting the high dopamine and the, the pleasure that I would have on my phone, but I'm still getting something. So the pain is just that little delta of loss. Yeah. But once I'm doing it, I, I love it and I don't, I don't miss the phone.

[00:42:32] Yeah, you don't regret it. Yeah.

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[00:42:33] **Anna Lembke:** Yes. Agreed. But, um. I imagine it's not always easy to stop using your phone when you said you would and make that transition to the vi you would imagine

[00:42:44] **Nate Hagens:** correctly.

[00:42:46] **Anna Lembke:** Right. And as we, and as, as our addiction gets worse to the devices, that that gets harder and harder until, you know, if you, you know, it's very, it can be very instructive to look at the extreme cases and, and we see extreme cases, you know, young people who are otherwise healthy, lovely parents, all the privilege you could ask for and literally cannot get out of bed cannot.

[00:43:07] Leave their homes, cannot go to school, cannot get off their devices. So you take that extreme case and, and you, you see that that is what can happen.

[00:43:17] **Nate Hagens:** So what happens when you get constantly flooded with dopamine and then you get habituated to it, and then you get more, you want more from porn or gambling or shopping or whatever, and then all of a sudden you don't get any?

[00:43:33] Um, is, is, is because also, like you said, dopamine isn't only a prediction or a reward, but it also is for motivation and movement. Like if our ancestors didn't have dopamine, they never would've left the cave to go hunt or anything.

[00:43:48] **Anna Lembke:** Right? Right. So what, what

[00:43:49] **Nate Hagens:** happens when you. Okay, let me ask you this. Um, and then, you know, double barreled question, hypothetically, I'm, I'm not advocating

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for this or predicting it, but what would happen if the internet went down in the United States and everything else kind of stayed the same?

[00:44:03] **Anna Lembke:** Yeah. What,

[00:44:04] **Nate Hagens:** what would happen to people?

[00:44:05] **Anna Lembke:** Yeah. So, uh, the initial response would, people would go into withdrawal, you know? Okay. They would be, and, and, and withdrawal would be characterized by constantly checking and rechecking and rechecking and trying to get the thing to work again in a compulsive way.

[00:44:20] Right. Someone would say, let's just go outside. It's clearly down. No, no. It's, I'm gonna, you might, you know, I'm gonna try to figure out, and that could go on. I, I suspect that was. For weeks, but probably really badly for about 14 days because that, that's acute withdrawal. So when no matter what the drug is, what we see is those first 10 to 14 days are incredibly painful.

[00:44:39] People are more irritable, more depressed, more anxious, and in a state of constant craving, and the craving just gets worse. And this is our brain trying to get us to like, do the thing again and again. Because essentially what happens with when we flood our brain with these reinforcers and a lot of dopamine gets stimulated, the brain compensates by downregulating dopamine transmission, for example, by involuting postsynaptic dopamine receptors, such that we end up in a dopamine deficit state.

[00:45:06] And that is the state of being addicted. You're like, you're, you're, you're, you're tonic. Levels of dopamine are below what they were before. And so now your brain is telling you constantly you need to continue to get dopamine 'cause I'm below what I'm supposed to be. You need to bring me back up to homeostasis,

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[00:45:25] **Nate Hagens:** not only below what you were addicted to, but below your normal healthy baseline that that's it.

[00:45:30] **Anna Lembke:** Exactly. And that feels

[00:45:32] **Nate Hagens:** terrible physically. That feels

[00:45:33] **Anna Lembke:** terrible. The drive to homeostasis or whatever our baseline is, is a very powerful physiologic impulse. So. That's what's so, it's so fascinating when people first stop their drug of choice or their behavior, whatever it is, the craving is unbearable.

[00:45:51] It's unbearable, and it feels like it's going to last for freaking ever. Mm-hmm. But it's amazing. It doesn't, if you can just go long enough without using your brain recalibrates, right? And your dopamine transmission level gets back up to whatever, you know, the tonic baseline was, and now all of a sudden the craving isn't there or it's not as intense, you can enjoy other more modest rewards like going for a walk or watching a sunset.

[00:46:19] You can eat a piece of fruit. Let's say you gave up sugar. You could then eat, you know, you gave up processed sugar. You could eat. Like a grape and it would be like, oh my gosh, this is incredible. Right? So then other things really are more salient. It's not that we're like telling ourselves, oh, this grape, you know, is so much better for me.

[00:46:38] No, it's actually amazing because you haven't had processed sugar for two weeks.

[00:46:43] **Nate Hagens:** So the, there is specifically some science and empirical evidence that the 10 to 14 days is a, is a thing. It's not four days and it's not 40 days, it's, it's around two weeks.

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[00:46:55] **Anna Lembke:** Certainly clinically that's. An observation that's been around for ages now, there is clearly something called the protracted abstinence syndrome, which is that people differ in their degrees of neuroplasticity.

[00:47:08] So you know, whereas some people might just need four weeks, typically in clinical care, if people can abstain for four weeks, they feel worse in the first two weeks. But by four weeks they start to feel considerably better, not just better than they did in the first two weeks of acute withdrawal, but often better than they have for a very long time.

[00:47:28] Both in terms of improved anxiety, improved sleep, improved mood, improved attention, and very little craving. There are some people who have what we call the protracted abstinence syndrome, where they actually feel like crap for a lot longer, but even those individuals, you know, if you give it enough time, months, in some cases, two or three years, eventually they get back to that, you know, a better sort of balance.

[00:47:53] Um, you know, Nora Volkow has done a study looking at somebody with methamphetamine addiction, looking at dopamine transmission in the nucleus accumbens, and finding that. Two weeks after stopping use, that individual still had below threshold normal levels of dopamine transmission. But at about 12 to 14 months of not using that individual, again, had more robust levels of dopamine transmission.

[00:48:16] **Nate Hagens:** Okay. Two follow-up questions that, um, first of all, um. When you hear the term addictive personality, what does that mean? Uh, and why are some people more prone to these things?

[00:48:29] **Anna Lembke:** It's definitely the case that some people are more prone to addiction than others based on their inborn genetics. We know that from family and twin studies showing that if you have a biological parent or grandparent with

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addiction, you're more likely to get addicted yourself, even if raised outside of that substance.

[00:48:46] Using home. That distinction is important because we know that the way you're raised also impacts your risk of addiction. If you're raised in a home or your caregivers model and condone addictive substance use or maladaptive substance use or addictive behaviors, you're more likely to engage in those behaviors yourself.

[00:49:03] But the point is, even if you're not raised, let's say you're raised in a teetotaling home where nobody drinks. If you had a biological parent or grandparent with alcohol use disorder, you are more likely compared to the general population to get addicted yourself. What is that? Well, it's genetic, it's complex.

[00:49:19] Polygenic. So it's not one gene. Um, we, we, it's probably so complex that we'll never identify, you know, even a, um, like a family of genes. 'cause it probably has to do with everything from like, what is your, you know, innate propensity for emotion dysregulation, impulsivity, um, you know, your cognitive and executive function.

[00:49:41] Like it's gotta be this really complex amalgam of how good are your mental breaks and how much is your brain want to like, press on the, uh, accelerator of, of your appetite. And that's just so complicated that it's not gonna be one gene. So when we talk about the addictive personality, what, what we were talking about, we don't use that term anymore just 'cause we don't think of it as being that medical, but it's still kind of a good term.

[00:50:07] It just means, yeah, this person came in the world with, to some degree a high genetic load for addiction. Yeah. Such that even with sort of like an ideal. Upbringing or caregiving environment. This person probably is vulnerable to developing addiction.

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[00:50:21] **Nate Hagens:** That makes sense. Um, so back to the 10 to 14 days thing.

[00:50:26] So, um. Alcoholics Anonymous, uh, has the 10 step program and people who were 12 step.

[00:50:34] **Anna Lembke:** Yep.

[00:50:34] **Nate Hagens:** 12 step. Yeah. People that were addicted to alcohol, then they can never have another drink because if they do, then they rebound. Is it the same thing for digital media and, and other things that if you go on a fast for 14 days and you had too much processed sugar and now blueberries taste awesome.

[00:50:52] If you go back to Captain Crunch with crunch berries, are you gonna be more susceptible to what you were previously addicted or is there kind of a refractory period or how does that work?

[00:51:02] **Anna Lembke:** Yeah, well, first of all, important to emphasize that just taking a break from your drug of choice for four weeks is not going to cure you of addiction to that drug if you are addicted.

[00:51:11] Right? Okay. And if it's going to reset reward pathways to, you know, decrease your tolerance, you can enjoy that drug again, uh, you know, with more intensity or just enjoy other things, um, you know that. A four week fast from that drug may do that, but. If you were to go back to using that drug, yeah, you might, you might be able to use it in moderation.

[00:51:35] On the other hand, you might have some, what we call the absence violation syndrome, where suddenly you're right back to where, where you were binging or using, uh, daily, very heavily. It really depends on the person and the severity of their addiction to that substance or behavior. So for example, um, people with severe food addiction.

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[00:51:52] They will tell you that essentially no amount of mindful eating of sugar and highly processed foods will allow them to eat those foods in moderation.

None at all. They cannot for a lifetime. They cannot go back to eating sugar and highly palatable processed foods. 'cause once their brain gets the taste of that, they will.

[00:52:13] Um. Again, be over consuming in a maladaptive un, an unhealthy way. The philosophy behind Alcoholics Anonymous is that if people are truly addicted, um, they could never drink again. Now, I will say that the whole field has shifted a little bit on this to acknowledge the possibility of moderation in some individuals, even in some individuals who have met criteria for addiction.

[00:52:36] And I've seen that clinically, we, we don't know why or how, but it is very clear that some people, after a period of abstinence and resetting reward pathways, some of those people with a great deal of planning and discipline are able to go back to using their drug of choice in moderation. Now, what the a, hes would say is, well, they were, if that's true, they were never actually addicted in the first place.

[00:52:57] I, I'm not sure I, I buy that. I think you can really have experienced addiction and at some point in your life. And you're from a very different place and with a lot of mindful attention, uh, I see people who are able to go back to using in moderation and not necessarily slip into those addictive patterns.

[00:53:16] **Nate Hagens:** When so many of these modern devices are necessary to function in today's world, is it even possible that humans can coexist with them and avoid addiction?

[00:53:25] **Anna Lembke:** Yeah. So, and you, you pointed out that it was really your job and you're having to be on your device. Engaging with social media that has made it really hard for you to not overconsume it.

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[00:53:35] And this is a huge problem and this is why talking about moderation and not necessarily abstinence is really important when it comes to digital media because most of us cannot abstain. We have to be engaged with the medium in order to be in contact with our family members, um, you know, do our jobs. The hope is that we can figure out what are the aspects of the medium that make it very addictive and potentially change those technological affordances or dynamic design features and, and turn the volume down on those.

[00:54:10] Just like, like low nicotine cigarettes. Um, such that yes, a person who's really vulnerable to addiction will probably get addicted to any aspect of the digital medium, but for the, for the folks who are, you know, not that necessarily vulnerable to it, is there a way to redesign things, um, so that we can.

[00:54:29] You know, use it as a tool but not as a drug.

[00:54:31] **Nate Hagens:** So here's a question I'm curious about. Um, does addiction wane as one ages generally? Uh, is there a peak age for addiction or said differently? Does dopamine production in a human brain reach, uh, a, a, an apex at some point and decline with age?

[00:54:50] **Anna Lembke:** Yeah. So I don't think it's really related to, uh, like dopamine release or, or, or necessarily that, but it.

[00:54:59] It is true that, you know, for the longest time, epidemiologic data or population level data showed that for most people, if you were going to struggle with addiction, it would manifest in adolescence and young adulthood. Mm-hmm. And it would peak around that time and then gradually wane as people either, you know, got into recovery or died from their addiction, or just were forced because of the physiologic, uh, you know, and health sequelae to stop.

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[00:55:28] But that is changing in the sense that we are now seeing more like of a bimodal distribution, two peaks, one peak in adolescence, young adulthood, and the other peak in retirement. And, and this is fascinating, this is, so this is essentially the baby boomers who have smoked pot and, and drunk alcohol, you know, in moderation for most of their adult life who then retire.

[00:55:52] And suddenly have all this leisure time, have disposable income, and now have access to super potent pot. Not the stuff that they, you know, mm-hmm. Were using in their twenties and all these other drugs, you know, Netflix, whatever it is. And so we are seeing more and more older people manifest de novo addictions, you know, in their lives, late in their lives for the first time.

[00:56:15] And of course. That is even tougher to treat because when we age, we lose the neuroplasticity to now go back, you know, to like our pre addicted state. So in fact, that's a really tough population.

[00:56:27] **Nate Hagens:** This is just all so relevant, uh, to what I refer to as the human predicament. And in, in a recent, uh, uh, I do these things on Friday called, frankly, and last weeks or two weeks ago was called the, the coming Quadruple bifurcation.

[00:56:44] And one of the categories, I, I hypothesize that in coming decades, uh, the rich people in our world might not be people with lots of money. It might be those people that have mental health and wellbeing and are psychologically adjusted, um, and haven't been pulled down into the vortex of all these, uh.

[00:57:07] Possible addictions in our culture. What, what are your thoughts on that?

[00:57:11] **Anna Lembke:** Well, yeah, I mean, I, I, I've had similar thoughts, but slightly a variation on that, where I, I think that there may be the inside people and

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the outside people. Mm-hmm. And the inside people are like the matrix type people, like lo you know, lo locked into their machines and not moving their bodies and not engaging with other real people in the world.

[00:57:32] And the outside people are the people who are still doing those things. Now, how that would map onto socioeconomic lines, I don't know. Um, probably ultimately in The Great Simplification, you know, if we get there, it would be that the wealthier people are the outside people, but right now, you know, everybody wants to have that, you know, be like CEO of some digital company.

[00:57:58] I, I don't know, you know,

[00:57:59] **Nate Hagens:** sometimes I feel shame that 30 years ago I made fun of the Amish. Right. So, so one idea I keep coming back to on this podcast is that most people, uh, maybe 98% of people today are dealing with some sort of trauma, and that healing, that trauma is gonna be central to facing the challenges ahead.

[00:58:23] So you mentioned earlier about stress, uh, and, and such. So how does trauma affect someone's relation to dopamine?

[00:58:31] **Anna Lembke:** How do you define trauma?

[00:58:33] **Nate Hagens:** I don't know. I mean, it's a, a cultural phrase that people have things in their childhood or their teenage years that they're still going through the motions and trying to heal and, and we're not all from, uh, a, a healthy starting place.

[00:58:49] And those cycles get repeated through our lives. But I'm, I'm not an expert on that. I'm, I'm just repeating what I've heard.

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[00:58:56] **Anna Lembke:** Yeah, I mean, certainly, you know, when we are younger, we are. Um, very sensitive to the influence of our caregivers and that shaping has profound effects that last for the rest of their lives, but the environment that we live in right now.

[00:59:15] Also has profound shaping influences and can, you know, cause trauma, um, you know, including the trauma of compulsive overconsumption wrought by these dig, you know, drug ified media. One of the things that. I think we are potentially overdoing right now is trying to conceptualize all of our suffering as rooted in some childhood trauma.

[00:59:39] I think that explanatory model only goes so far in terms of leading really to healing and can actually lead to basically this kind of circling the drain where we're not actually getting better, we're just sort of wedded to this explanatory model of childhood trauma. So, I don't know, I always like to like qualify.

[01:00:01] Like what, what are we talking about when we're talking about trauma? Because um, I mean I think just being alive is traumatic

[01:00:08] **Nate Hagens:** in the United States alive today. A lot of people are probably experiencing some sort of traumatic, uh, thing every week.

[01:00:17] **Anna Lembke:** Yeah, yeah. Right. But I also think, again, I, I'm, I, I would just say trauma as the explanatory model for my suffering.

[01:00:28] I, I worry that it kind of then invokes this kind of victimhood narrative where we don't. Um, then, you know, take agency for what we can actually change. And we, there's this constant like blaming and otherness.

[01:00:43] **Nate Hagens:** Yeah.

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[01:00:44] **Anna Lembke:** Which I'm just not sure is the way forward.

[01:00:47] **Nate Hagens:** Well, because then you, you just, oh, well this is why I'm doing this thing is because of my childhood and whatever.

[01:00:53] And it doesn't give you the agency and the discipline, right. To leave your phone and go for a hike or, or all the things. So I, I can see what you're saying.

[01:01:02] **Anna Lembke:** Yeah, yeah.

[01:01:03] **Nate Hagens:** Yeah.

[01:01:03] **Anna Lembke:** I mean, it is important to look at our past and say, okay, these were the patterns in my family of origin, and that's what I had to do then to kind of make it through.

[01:01:11] But that's not ul ultimately that adaptive. So, you know, I need to understand where that came from and, and maybe change some things there that, that I think is good. But this sort of like, uh, oh, I'm gonna constantly be stuck and triggered and I can't do this now and I can't do that because I had this kind of childhood.

[01:01:28] I don't know. I mean. Especially, I can tell you in clinical care, you know, we see a lot of patients who will describe these horrific parents in this horrific childhood, and then we'll meet these parents, the nicest people who tried really hard.

[01:01:42] **Nate Hagens:** Yeah.

[01:01:43] **Anna Lembke:** Do you know, I, I just, I just think it's, you know,

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[01:01:46] **Nate Hagens:** I agree with you.

[01:01:46] I, I, I'm, I'm glad that you stated that. Um, so, so let me kind of veer into, um, the heart of, of the issue, um, that I'm, I'm interested in. One of the most alarming things about addiction is the ripple effect it has on our ability to maintain healthy community and social practices. So, can you describe some of the more common effects that addiction has on an individual human's capacity and, and even desire to socialize with others.

[01:02:18] **Anna Lembke:** Yeah, I mean, you know, many people have said it before and I'll just repeat it now. Addiction is the opposite of connection. It really is. Even if we start out using our drug of choice with friends or family, and it's fun and adaptive, if we veer into addiction, the vast majority of people end up using alone.

[01:02:38] Um, whether it's, you know, eating alone or gambling alone, or drinking alone, or smoking alone, or shooting up alone. Um, but even more importantly, the, the drug itself essentially comes to replace important people in our lives.

[01:02:52] **Nate Hagens:** So, um, you watched a, a short video on, on my work, so I don't expect you to to to know all the things that we talk about here.

[01:03:00] But there's one side of it that all this technology is here and it's, it, it creates addictions and compulsions, but another aspect of the carbon pulse is. All the benefits we get from these 500 billion, uh, army strong of fossil workers, where we combine coal, oil and natural gas with machines to get these indistinguishable from magic, uh, um, products and experiences is that itself has, um, minimized our need for others.

[01:03:35] Yeah. And so people are in their houses and they have access to clicking all the things that they want. And so that itself has been kind of an antisocial development where back in the day we lived in a community and we

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needed each other. We interacted with each other. Um. Do you have any thoughts on that?

[01:03:53] **Anna Lembke:** I mean, I agree with you a hundred percent. I mean, the, the data show that in the United States, more people are living alone than ever before in human history, and I totally a hundred percent agree that the technology is making that possible and driving that, because we can connect, you know, through, I mean, people will all say, well, isn't it so great though that we can connect online?

[01:04:17] It's like, well, it's, it's. It's great to a point, but what they don't see is that the ability to connect online is actually causing people to be disconnected. This is where, this is where people are not, you know, seeing like the throughput there. Um, and, and you know, we, we see this at all ages and people are worried about teenagers, but people, even people living in retirement homes are not like gathering in communal spaces in retirement homes, which is nominally part of the reason that they moved to the retirement home in the first place.

[01:04:48] They're all in their little cubby holes watching their Netflix, you know, or whatever it is, you know, trying to go on social media or Facebook or all that stuff. And, and I, I personally think that, um, COVID, the harm of COVID was in part made possible or driven by the fact that we had a technology that actually allowed us to not send kids to school.

[01:05:17] I mean, I, I, I'm sorry. I really like that went too far and it would not have happened had the technology not made online school possible.

[01:05:29] **Nate Hagens:** I'm just gonna pause here and just say that it's just so. Amazing to me. I, I used to say, I don't know, which is more amazing that we evolved from simpler organisms or that we figured out we evolved.

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[01:05:42] And I do get this strong sense that there are converging conversations like this one and, and many others on our reality, what it is. Yes. And the things that you're describing 20, 30 years ago, people would've thought, oh, that's an interesting Twilight Zone episode. Right. And this is our lives now. Yeah.

[01:06:01] But I do actually feel, uh, and I might be biased because of the people I talk to on this show, but I feel there is this up swelling of. Of recognition and awareness of, of these issues?

[01:06:14] **Anna Lembke:** Oh, absolutely. The, the, the really, the surreal quality of our lives. And, you know, this, I mean, so derealization is a term in psychiatry that means feeling like the, the world's not real.

[01:06:27] Depersonalization is a feeling that, you know, I'm not real. And those terms have been around for a long time. You know, people exp who are, you know, in, in acute panic or psychosis can have feelings of derealization or depersonalization. I think those phenomena are like ubiquitous. Now. They're endemic because this experience of interacting online, just it's so.

[01:06:49] Surreal. And you, and it's so not embodied and it's so not communal that I think people are really, really lost. I mean, I know, I, I feel, I feel it often.

[01:07:01] **Nate Hagens:** Not to get too personal, but you're an expert on this phenomenon. Do you build in speed bumps and guardrails in your own life to make sure and have dinner parties with friends?

[01:07:13] And I mean, I, I assume, well, you, you said your husband doesn't have a, a smartphone, but do you have the discipline to create, uh, a, a structure for yourself that's healthy?

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[01:07:26] **Anna Lembke:** So this great question, like the discipline and structure, like I, I'm not that disciplined if I lived alone. I would probably be watch YouTube videos all day long.

[01:07:36] You know, I would get sucked in so easily. I feel very fortunate to be married, so I have a companion and we work together to limit our time online. Um, and we do that by spending a lot of time together, spending a lot of time with friends and with family. Um, you know, he doesn't even have a smartphone. I own one, but it's mostly powered off and I actually do not text and I don't even, I try even not to text with my own children why I find it a very dissatisfying form of communication that is optimized for smiley face emojis and can lead to a lot of hurt feelings and misunderstandings.

[01:08:14] I think email is better because email doesn't come with that expectation of the immediate response, which if you expect that and you don't get that, that's like dopamine levels going below normal right there, and then this craving and like searching for that next hit. So yeah, we do a lot of trying to, you know.

[01:08:34] Live our lives at the pace of mindfulness, so to speak, where we do not touch a screen first thing in the morning. Uh, we do not have screens in the bedroom. Um, he doesn't, like I say, even have a phone. Mine's turned off, but I won't even go on my laptop until like I've exercised, I've eaten breakfast, I've read a paper that gets delivered to my house.

[01:08:56] Um, you know, I've made my bed. Uh, I've done all the things that I need to do to kind of like center myself for the day. And then I go on with a list of what I'm gonna do. And I try really hard not to go down rabbit holes. Do I go down rabbit holes? I'm, yeah. Do I have like podcasts I listen to or shows I watch every once in a while?

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[01:09:17] Yes, I do, but I really try to keep it to a minimum. And I think I probably average. Five hours a week.

[01:09:24] **Nate Hagens:** Had I asked you this question 10 years ago, the answer you just gave me would've been nice. Um, now hearing what your routine is, it's fricking impressive. And I, and I think that's, uh, that's a testament to where our culture has gone in the last

[01:09:38] **Anna Lembke:** Yeah.

[01:09:38] Right.

[01:09:39] **Nate Hagens:** 10 years. So, so if intimacy and connection are so important historically and today, and so rewarding, can you speculate on why socialization is so difficult and challenging a skill for so many people, especially in increasingly younger individuals who I know in their mid twenties who are really bright and good people, but they just don't socialize.

[01:10:04] **Anna Lembke:** I mean, socialization has been drug ified, right? We've distilled it. Down to all its most reinforcing aspects without any of the complexity or work that's required in real relationships. But if you think about for a second, what it takes to have a real relationship, first of all, you have to get off the couch, go outside and find the people, right?

[01:10:24] Then when you find the people, they're not all gorgeous and fascinating, you know? They're just like you, you like, like

[01:10:29] **Nate Hagens:** they are on Facebook,

[01:10:30] **Anna Lembke:** right? They're like you and me. They're just, you know, average people. Average looks, not to mention, relationships require reciprocity. They are give and take. You have to listen to me.

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[01:10:44] I have to listen to you will disagree. There has to be compromise. There has to be an enormous amount of talk, even just for me to know what's going on in your mind, because you think differently than I do. Then you compare and contrast that to what happens on social media, or worse yet on ai, people are like, but my AI avatar understands me so much better than anybody else in real life and, and gives me such a good advice.

[01:11:10] It's like, yeah, for absolutely nothing. You don't have to do anything for ai. Of course you love it. It's no work. It's completely frictionless and therefore it is not a real relationship.

[01:11:24] **Nate Hagens:** It's not only limiting your real social relationships, but what happens if there's a power outage or there's an AI winter or something, your brain is not going to be in a healthy place, uh, at that point, which is something, uh, that I worry about.

[01:11:40] Yeah. Based on your research, what do you think are the biggest structural components getting in the way of teaching the healthy social skills that would help counteract, um, our addictive tendencies with, with respect to social media and, and other things?

[01:11:56] **Anna Lembke:** Well, I mean, just simply spending too much time online.

[01:11:58] You know, kids being on screens. In school schools, schools are where kids get socialized. Families are where kids get socialized. You know, these are the units of socialization in our society. If you've got families now everybody's in a separate room watching their own separate entertainment device, you're not socializing, you know, you're not board games.

[01:12:18] You know, tabletop board games, a lot of socializing happens in those kind of interactions. Household chores, um, you know, meals, you know, sharing

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the labor of, of doing, you know, household work, massive socialization that's not happening. Schools, same thing. Ed tech took over, we were all gonna become geniuses.

[01:12:36] Instead, we all have a DHD, um, you know, huge problems. They gotta roll that way back. We need to bring back more woodworking and more, you know, uh, car mechanic and more like actual writing the paper myself and thinking of the ideas and structuring the ideas and how do I make an argument, you know, that that's all gone by the wayside.

[01:12:57] **Nate Hagens:** So if, if there are people listening to this, especially young people, um, there's gonna be a distribution of responses because as you were describing it about gotta get off the couch and gotta go find the people and the people are gonna disagree and it's reciprocity. I was thinking. Oh my God. AI and social media are just so much easier and more pleasurable.

[01:13:18] Yeah, yeah. Except there's a cost. So the people that are listening to this are saying, God dang it, she's right. This is not what I want for my future. I want to, hopefully, hopefully. Um, but there's a distribution, right? So maybe 10 or 15% of the people like go to the level that they want to be proactive and make changes in, in your experience.

[01:13:45] Especially with young people, kind of 10 to 25 years old, what have you learned about that process?

[01:13:51] **Anna Lembke:** Well, don't, don't try to go it alone. You know, go find like-minded people and connect with them because it can't just be about what I'm not gonna do. It has to also be about what I'm moving toward. And that has to be about human connection.

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[01:14:04] Um, and, and also I, I think personally, spiritual pathways, however you define that, is also a form of connecting to something greater than ourselves, which is really important and powerful. Um, so, you know, it's about disconnecting from, you know, this highly addictive medium. Um, using it as a tool, as we all must, or most of us must, but try not to use it as a drug to change the way that we feel.

[01:14:29] **Nate Hagens:** Could you imagine if, um. Not to be authoritarian in any way, but if we had some sort of a mandatory slash recommended, uh, two week, three week outward bound sort of nature experiences for groups of young people that was built into their high school and college curriculums where you, you didn't have access to it, it would be a reset of sorts and you would be surrounded by others going through the same thing.

[01:14:58] But it might be like herding cats, which is why we don't do it more often. Um, what are your thoughts on that?

[01:15:03] **Anna Lembke:** Well, it happens for, you know, wealthier families with summer camp. And, and, and kids rave about it for the most part. Like, they're so happy and they feel so much more connected. They feel like they have really deep friendships on summer camp.

[01:15:15] The problem is, you know, if it's like the all or nothing, then you have like the binge relapse type thing. It would be better if we could embed more consistent times within a single day over every day of the week. Kind of like what you try to do, where it's like, okay, I've been on online for an hour, now I'm gonna go for an hour bike ride.

[01:15:32] So a collective attempt to be off together and then to be on together, I think is, is probably a better long-term solution. Um, and then digital etiquette. You know, like what are the appropriate times and places and amounts of times

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for us to be online and when, when culturally should I begin to feel ashamed about, you know, this behavior.

[01:15:56] 'cause that's what we don't have is we don't really have like, it's, it's just normalized.

[01:16:01] **Nate Hagens:** What if people in the world like your husband, um, are suddenly seen as the highest status symbol? Oh my gosh, that guy doesn't have a phone and he, he, he's not addicted to any of this stuff. I want to hang out with him.

[01:16:16] I'm being a little bit facetious, but really those aren't our, our idols and our icons, um, right now and we kind of glorify fast complex technology and the spokespeople forum

[01:16:29] **Anna Lembke:** and the money that goes with it.

[01:16:31] **Nate Hagens:** Yeah,

[01:16:32] **Anna Lembke:** yeah, yeah. I mean, I think that would be great. And I think that's again, where you have to have this sort of cultural undercurrent or this kind of breaking away from current.

[01:16:43] Materialist values and really integrating sort of a, a very different value system that really holds human connection and, you know, our stewardship of the planet and our natural resources at the center of our value system. And, you know, getting back to the Amish, I mean, that is, I mean the Amish are fascinating people.

[01:17:05] That is essentially what they did. They said at some point we believe that continuing to engage with modernity and technology in this way will erode and destroy our core religious values. So we are going to reject technology. Um,

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and we're doing so because we believe that in doing so, we will preserve our connections to each other and to God.

[01:17:30] And, and they have done that. I mean, not that these are perfect communities and in fact there's addiction in these communities. Some of them have smartphones, you know, they have, they have their social ills, but. It's been a powerfully, uh, staying community and, um. I think in many ways, you know, those people have a richer life than many of us living otherwise.

[01:17:53] **Nate Hagens:** Well, I'm glad they're around where I live because if I need some work on the barn or the, you know, I, I call them because I can't do it myself. You're right. Um, but, uh, but yeah, that's, that's fascinating. So, in your work, uh, although I haven't heard you, um, discuss this on podcasts, uh, that I'm aware of, you discuss something you call radical honesty as a way to reduce the chance of addiction, which to me seems like a bit of a high bar on the surface.

[01:18:21] Can you explain why these two things are are connected?

[01:18:24] **Anna Lembke:** So this was simply a clinical observation that I made over the years that. People who were able to get into sustained recovery from very severe addictions, almost universally embraced the idea of being radically honest. Meaning that they couldn't lie about anything, not even why they were five minutes late for a meeting.

[01:18:41] And it was sort of a universal theme that I just sort of became fascinated with. Some of them got into recovery through aa, which, you know, espouses what they call rigorous honesty, because of course when people are in their addiction, they're lying. But I really think there was something more going on with just the simple act of telling the truth that might.

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[01:19:00] Wake us up to our consumptive behaviors in a way that lying keeps shrouded. Um, and so I started to, you know, try to practice it in, in my own life. And now I think that we should all practice it, especially in this post, you know, post-truth politics age with fake, fake news and fake videos. You don't know what's real anymore.

[01:19:21] It's really important. And also like, you know, fake flattery. Like, you know, when kids nowadays are not from their parents and schools aren't really getting real feedback about their strengths and weaknesses. 'cause everybody's so worried they're gonna traumatize them and have them end up, you know, on the, the psychoanalyst couch some days.

[01:19:39] So, so now kids aren't, you know, they're being told how wonderful they are, even when they're not that wonderful or when they've done something wrong. So I really think that. For parents and, and really people in recovery and just generally everybody practicing radical honesty is a really good way to wake us up to what we're actually doing.

[01:19:58] And in becoming more aware of that, we will, we will tell more truthful autobiographies. The stories of our lives are not just a way to organize the past. They're actually a roadmap for the future. They give us access to better information to make, you know, better decisions going forward. There's even some neuroscience that suggests that telling the truth may activate our prefrontal cortex, which is so important for delayed gratification.

[01:20:22] So I, I just think it's a, it's such a simple, practical thing. You can wake up on any given day and say, you know what? I'm gonna try not to lie. And if you do that, you become aware, number one of how much you lie. In general, we all do, I think, and, and how hard it is not to lie. And these are small lies, just like, you know why, again, you know, oh, I'm so sorry I was late.

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[01:20:42] The traffic was really bad. No it wasn't. You took five extra minutes to read the paper and drink your coffee 'cause you didn't feel like leaving. So

[01:20:50] **Nate Hagens:** my name is Nate Hagens and I am addicted to digital media. Um, so like how do you start, what uh, how do you start with radical honesty for the people listening to the show?

[01:21:01] **Anna Lembke:** It's almost like setting up an extra level of awareness to track what you're saying to other people and to know where it's not a hundred percent loyal to what really happened. If you do that, you will realize very quickly that the impulse to cover up our selfishness or other very minor transgressions is so strong that most of us tell one to two lies per day.

[01:21:32] That's what the data show most adults tell one to two lies. So, so it just starts with trying not to do that and being aware how much we do that. And again, because it's so hard to tell nowadays what is real and what isn't. This is an effort to assert and embrace reality.

[01:21:48] **Nate Hagens:** Well, this really is at the core of my podcast because I think our culture is in various forms of what I refer to as a consensus trance, partially because the truth is.

[01:22:03] Painful. Uh, if we understand all the things about climate change and energy depletion and polarization and nuclear war, and all the things we discuss on this show, um, are difficult. So there's a cognitive dissonance, uh, um, leap there that has to be, uh, crossed. But I, I think this, well, it might be different than what you're talking about with dopamine and addiction, but I do believe that our culture is starved for authenticity because as social primates, we intuitively know that a lot of these things online are fake and capturing our attention.

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[01:22:42] We intuitively know that we're being pulled so towards something that ends up making money for others. So what you're, what you're suggesting is just a step in the direction of authenticity in your own life, and then some of these other things become more easy to, to, to change in a, in a healthy way.

[01:23:02] **Anna Lembke:** Yeah, I mean, I. I haven't. That's very interesting. I haven't really thought about that in terms of authenticity. Authenticity is a funny word because of course it's been co-opted, you know, now by all these commercial elements and all these influencers who now, you know, they perform authenticity. You're right,

[01:23:20] **Nate Hagens:** right.

[01:23:21] So go back to your term radical honesty.

[01:23:23] **Anna Lembke:** I mean, it, it's, it's just so hard. But yeah, I mean, I, I just think that your word trance really resonates for me. I think we are, you know, we're in a waking dream. We're in a trance and part of us doesn't wanna wake up, but we absolutely need to. And, and a part of us wants to too.

[01:23:41] We really do. And I think that's what, what you're saying, like, when people want authenticity, people want to know what is real in the world. And they themselves want to feel real in the world. And telling the truth is a way to feel real in the world. 'cause it's like, yeah, you know, it's not all butterflies and rainbows, but this is who I am.

[01:24:02] And people do want that.

[01:24:03] **Nate Hagens:** I did listen to your podcast on, uh, di of a CEO and when you volunteered that you were addicted to reading romance novels, that made me instantly like you because it was a vulnerable thing that you shared. And, and I

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think we're so used to not, people not sharing the, the struggles and, and their own personal things that they have challenges with.

[01:24:28] So I, I actually do think radical honesty is something that our culture dearly needs, and we can kind of sense it when it's happening. Yeah.

[01:24:38] **Anna Lembke:** When people are being real and people that, that resonates. People really want that.

[01:24:44] **Nate Hagens:** Yeah. So, so what are the best practices, um, Anna, for, for listeners who, who would like to learn to live in moderation, um, with a substance that they might have an addictive tendency towards?

[01:24:57] Is there a, a healthy balance possible, or what was the, is there a checklist that, that you advised to start with?

[01:25:05] **Anna Lembke:** Well, I. I recommend that if your long-term goal is moderation and not abstinence, you should still start with a four week period of abstinence to reset reward pathways. Not to say that that's a guarantee that your brain will reset, but I can tell you from clinical experience, about 80% of folks, if they take four weeks of not using their drug of choice, they get to a place where they feel like they have, um, you know, their tolerance has changed.

[01:25:31] They are able to take joy in other more modest rewards. They have a lot more insight on the true impact of their drug use. And again, I use the term drug broadly to include all kinds of behaviors as well. So that's a much better starting point to then enter into the, uh, you know, the prospect of moderation.

[01:25:49] And I just think in our dopamine overloaded world, to use it metaphorically, um, we must engage in what I call self binding strategies. And these are just these. Literal and metacognitive barriers that we put between

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ourselves and our drug of choice so that we can anticipate desire and press the pause button on desire.

[01:26:10] Because if we just rely on willpower alone and you know, are surrounded by all the things to consume, we are not gonna be able to, to do it, none of us.

[01:26:19] **Nate Hagens:** And it's worse because if you rely on willpower and you're not able to do it, you feel crappy and guilty, uh, to boot.

[01:26:25] **Anna Lembke:** That's exactly, exactly right. So it's as simple as like, if, if your problem is, you know, processed food and sugar, get it out of the house.

[01:26:33] Um, if your problem is alcohol or cannabis or heroin, you know, get it out of the house. Get rid of your paraphernalia, uh, let people know. So use other people to co-regulate. Let people know you're doing this, you know, join a mutual help group.

[01:26:46] **Nate Hagens:** I think that's critical because, um. Doing these things alone is just not gonna work.

[01:26:53] And I think to find, find the others, and find a group of yes, five people and say, you know what? I've been noticing this about myself. Let's, let's the five of us do this together.

[01:27:05] **Anna Lembke:** Totally. Or, or go to a preexisting group. There are a lot of them out there. Some of them are modeled on 12 Step of aa, some are modeled, have other models.

[01:27:13] But there are a lot out there. There's a group called Internet and Technology Addicts Anonymous, ITAA. It's a group of folks who have recognized they have an unhealthy relationship with digital media and they wanna change it.

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Um, and many of them work in tech. So, you know, they're, and, and through their collective wisdom, people are figuring out, you know, how to make that happen.

[01:27:32] They're doing it together. It's very, very exciting. And there are even medications that we're now using for repetitive control. That's the point we've gotten to where we have to take medications to help us curb our appetites.

[01:27:43] **Nate Hagens:** Like, like, like what?

[01:27:44] **Anna Lembke:** Like the GLP ones? Ozempic wegovy. Like naltrexone, an opioid receptor blocker.

[01:27:49] Oh.

[01:27:49] **Nate Hagens:** So, but GLP one makes people less hungry, but it also does something with their, their dopamine drive, right?

[01:27:56] **Anna Lembke:** Yeah. So it, it, we think that it works in part by decreasing the amount of dopamine that's released in response to our drug of choice. And when we. Release less dopamine, that means it's less reinforcing, and then we have less craving or desire to do it again and again.

[01:28:13] So if you combine that with the other things, other self binding strategies and, you know, a, a desire to use in moderation or not at all, um, you know, that can be a nudge that can really make a big difference. People talk about food noise or craving noises. It can really calm, calm that down. So, yeah, I mean, you know, getting it outta the house with technology, deleting apps, going gray scale, turning off notifications, powering the device down all the way, actually leaving the house without the device and doing outings without it.

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[01:28:42] And people get like serious panic mode. Like, you know, I'm not gonna be like, what happened if this, it's like, you know, you know that you'll find another solution, it's gonna be okay.

[01:28:52] **Nate Hagens:** So I wanna be respectful of, of your time. Uh, but just as a. Human being alive at this moment. I, I just love talking to you because these are fascinating.

[01:29:04] **Anna Lembke:** Aw. That's what a nice thing to say. Likewise. Yeah, we're, I know, I, it's so funny though. I feel like in a little bit we're like, oh, you know, the sky is falling the skies while we're to a couple of Henny pennies. But it is really what I think. So, uh, at the same time that I'm optimistic, as long as we talk about it, you know, I think we'll find the solution.

[01:29:23] **Nate Hagens:** What advice, I mean, you just listed a few things, um, and Audrey Tang was on the show earlier in the year, and my phone has most of the time been on gray scale, uh, since she recommended that. What specific recommendations do you have for young humans, uh, in their teens and twenties who become aware of the skies falling, uh, um, dynamic, uh, and, and wanna play a role and live healthy lives, uh, but understand some of the things that we've been discussing?

[01:29:51] What advice would you have?

[01:29:53] **Anna Lembke:** A couple things. Um, be very mindful of trying to use your devices as a tool and not as a drug, and specifically try to minimize your use of the device for entertainment or to change the way you feel in the moment. It is that action, that action with that immediate change that create sets us up for that reinforcing loop.

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[01:30:14] So you really wanna be very mindful of that. And then I think thinking about the, you know, the day as book ended. Not by our self-stimulation, masturbation, auto rewards, but bookended, importantly by healthy behaviors. So have a healthy morning routine and a healthy evening routine and try to keep that every day.

[01:30:37] So a healthy morning routine looks like you do not grab your phone or other stimulant in the morning to get yourself going. You do healthy things, you get up, you exercise, you pray, you make your bed, you brush your teeth, you eat breakfast, you, you do all of those embodied, difficult, effortful things first.

[01:30:56] Before you ever get on a device or, and,

[01:30:58] **Nate Hagens:** and what does that do? What does the science say about starting your day with, uh, good mental hygiene like you just described?

[01:31:05] **Anna Lembke:** It grounds you. Right? It grounds you. It, I think it puts you in a just a much better mental rhythm and from the perspective of pleasure and pain and your dopamine, you know, if you start the day with a dopamine spike, it, it's all downhill from there, uh, unless you up the ante.

[01:31:21] Right? Um, you know, which is, you know, I told you about, you know, in the rat experiments, chocolate increases dopamine, 50, 50%, uh, you know. Uh, sex is a hundred percent. Nicotine is under. I mean, that's why people, you know, first eat dinner, then have sex, then have a cigarette. Right. You have to keep going higher and higher.

[01:31:40] So you don't wanna do that and then,

[01:31:41] **Nate Hagens:** and then amphetamines after, after that, right?

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[01:31:43] **Anna Lembke:** Right, exactly. You don't wanna do that. Uh, you know, you wanna start with something that's hard. Do the hard thing first.

[01:31:49] **Nate Hagens:** I mean, I mean, what we're really talking about is we understand where we came from, how we got here, what makes us tick, what we're doing to the environment, what, what is available to us as a species and as individuals.

[01:32:02] We're trying hopefully to claw back some sovereignty in this. Human rat park that we live in. So this requires maturity and some discipline and hard work to go find the others and start these things. But I think it's, it's doable, right? For most of the people listening to this,

[01:32:25] **Anna Lembke:** it's doable and the rewards are incredible.

[01:32:28] So that's the other thing. It's like you reframing this entire enterprise, not as denying ourself pleasure and denying ourself rewards, but really going for the real deal, joy, you know, that we have the capacity to experience as humans.

[01:32:42] **Nate Hagens:** Thank you for that. Um, I have a couple closing questions I ask. Yeah.

[01:32:45] Uh, all my guests, what do you care most about in the world, Anna?

[01:32:48] **Anna Lembke:** Relationships with other people?

[01:32:51] **Nate Hagens:** Boy, there was no hesitation there. Um, what are you most worried about in the future, and what are you most hopeful about?

[01:32:59] **Anna Lembke:** I'm most worried about people getting isolated from each other, and I'm most worried about.

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[01:33:07] That's, that's what I'm most, most, what I'm most hopeful about, what I'm most hopeful about. I, I really am hopeful that we are going to be able to solve the problem of addiction and compulsive overconsumption and isolation. That is the sequelae of all of that. I do think we will get there.

[01:33:23] **Nate Hagens:** If you could wave a magic wand and there was no personal recourse to your decision, what is one thing you would do to improve human and planetary futures?

[01:33:33] **Anna Lembke:** Um, I would probably have set limited hours in the day when people had access to the internet and otherwise there would be no access. So I wouldn't throw the baby out with the bath water, but I would greatly limit it.

[01:33:52] **Nate Hagens:** That's in the distribution of possible futures. I, I, I, I could hypothesize. So, um, I was going to ask you, um, if you were to come back, what, what is one particularly interesting and relevant to human futures research topic, uh, that you would like to unpack?

[01:34:12] But earlier you mentioned you're, you're working on a new book. Maybe you could just give us a one minute teaser of, of your thinking on, on the new book on spirituality.

[01:34:22] **Anna Lembke:** Yeah. I mean, um, happy to come back once that that gets done. Yeah. I mean, I'm just, I, I'm very interested in the way that the progressive secularization of our world has left us.

[01:34:39] I think more impoverished and how we need a broader conceptualization of God and a more, um, some more open conceptualization to bring people back into kind of a spiritual life, which I really do think is key for revitalizing our experience.

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[01:35:01] **Nate Hagens:** Thank you so much for your important work, uh, and your time today.

[01:35:06] Uh, do you have any closing comments for people watching listening who understand and agree with what you've laid out here today?

[01:35:12] **Anna Lembke:** It was a joy to talk with you. I love your ideas. I think they're so cool. And I, I, I love your fearlessness and like trying to conceptually think of what's happening now and where it might lead.

[01:35:25] These are big ideas, um, you know, that you're playing with and really important ones, and. Like so true and so real and so, so, so part of what we need to grapple with. So I love that you're not afraid to do that. That's very cool.

[01:35:42] **Nate Hagens:** Anna Lemke, thank you so much, uh, to be continued, my new friend.

[01:35:47] **Anna Lembke:** Awesome.

[01:35:48] **Nate Hagens:** If you'd like to learn more about this episode, please visit The Great Simplification dot com for references and show notes.

[01:35:56] From there, you can also join our Hilo community and subscribe to our Substack newsletter. This show is hosted by me, Nate Hagens, edited by No Troublemakers Media, and produced by Misty Stinnett and Lizzie Sirianni. Our production team also includes Leslie Balut, Brady Hyen, Julia Maxwell, Gabriela Slayman, and Gracefield.

[01:36:20] Thank you for listening, and we'll see you on the next episode.