

Andrew Saintsing: Hi, you're tuned into 90.7 FM KALX Berkeley. I'm Andrew Saintsing, and this is The Graduates, the interview talk show where we speak to UC Berkeley graduate students about their work here on campus and around the world. Today I'm joined by Kelly Ziemer from the School of Social Welfare. Welcome to the show, Kelly.

Kelly Ziemer: Oh, thanks for having me, Andrew.

Saintsing: It's so great to have you here.

Ziemer: Thank you. Fun to geek out about research always.

Saintsing: Nice, that's what we're all about on this show.

Ziemer: Yes.

Saintsing: So, you study positive emotions, right?

Ziemer: Yes, I think specifically positive emotions that really intrigued me – there are subsets of positive emotions, and they are called self-transcendent emotions, and it's this idea that when you - I'll give you an example in a second – but the idea that when you experience a particular emotion it actually like takes you out of yourself with the ability to connect you to other people.

Saintsing: Okay, yeah.

Ziemer: So, you transcend yourself essentially, right? With the purpose of connecting you with others, so like creating social connections.

Saintsing: So, like what kind of emotion would that be?

Ziemer: Yeah, so ones that are talked about frequently are emotion of like gratitude for example. Awe is one of my favorite emotions and actually what really started my interest in positive emotions. So, Dacher Keltner here in Psychology studies awe. The research has been I think maybe 10 years now, 10 to 15 years on, and so, rather in its infancy still. But, awe is really this experience of when you are presented with this like mind-blowing stimulus that you can't really even comprehend, and a lot of people, they realize they're in awe when they're like, wow. Like wow is like this vocal reaction, right? So, a lot of our research comes out of nature, so like the Grand Canyon for example, or like beauty, music, and so, it's this idea that you then feel relatively small in this like greater vastness, but there's something kind of bigger than you out there, right?

Saintsing: Yes.

Ziemer: And, awe could be negative, too, right? It could be, it could be like a tornado. It could be a person, that you're like, how did that happen? How did they get into power? I'm in Berkeley, so I think I'm safe to say that here.

Saintsing: Yeah, I think you're safe to say that anywhere. Well, maybe not. So, so there's this like speechlessness about awe that's like really yeah. Is that kind of fundamental to the self-transcendence, or...

Ziemer: No, not specifically more self-transcendence is like you are really kind of taken out of yourself so you're focusing on yourself less. It's kind of like this – sometime, I mean oftentimes self-transcendence is spoken around like a spiritual religious context, but it really is this idea that we're connecting with someone else so in like in cooperation or caretaking. Like compassion for example is a self-transcendent emotion. Some emotion researchers would say that these are.

Saintsing: So, it's self-transcendent because you're –

Ziemer: Go ahead

Saintsing: With awe, you're connecting with someone else because you both have this like awestruck reaction with something, and you can relate more because it seems like you're reacting to some – I mean aside from maybe when you're in awe of a person in particular – but it seems like you're in awe of some spectacular vision, or...

Ziemer: Yes, and you could be by yourself, right?

Saintsing: Yeah.

Ziemer: You could be by yourself in the Grand Canyon, but because you kind of recognize that you're the smaller sense of self, that you, that there's something greater than then you out there, that it then leads you – and I think perhaps and maybe I'm even overstating here, but I don't know if they fully understand the mechanisms of why it leads to social connection, but just they call it in research literature they call it pro-social, so the ability to like be in awe allows you to be more altruistic, more generous, to want to help out other people because you realize that you're not alone essentially. But, there is a bigger thing out there than you, this like collective value.

Saintsing: Oh, yeah. That's really interesting is that that kind of, you know, thinking about religion, right? Where you have – I think all religions but I guess I'm not sure – it would have this belief in God would generally inspire awe in someone believed in that. And so, is that kind of the basis of religion having this community like tapping into this community building sense of awe?

Ziemer: Yeah, yeah, definitely. The origins of awe – I couldn't – when scholars write about awe they oftentimes reference, like, reverence to God. It's kind of mind-blowing concept, and you feel like there's something greater than you out there, so to speak. But, then you're coming together as a community, yeah, but around this belief,

Saintsing: Right. So, there's more emotions than just awe that would through self-transcendence allow this community-building?

Ziemer: Yeah, yeah, so oftentimes folks also speak about gratitude that way. They speak about self-compassion. Now mind you there's a lot of disagreement amongst the emotional world, so I don't even want to get into like the semantics. What I think is important to share, though, most specifically to my interests is, I think, some would say that love is also this self-transcendent trait. So, my own research interests over the past few years have really evolved into this idea of self-love and it's been an interesting journey for sure. As I started talking about self-love with folks over the past, I don't know, eight months or so from a research perspective because there's such a gradient, a spectrum so to speak of how people see self-love. So, if I go back to the self-transcendent nature, how I see self-love is self-love really has this ability to take us out of ourselves to then connect to others so we're focusing on ourselves like filling up our own love tank so to speak with the ability to then show up for others more and to connect more because if I'm feeling really good in myself and I'm taking care of myself that means I have more bandwidth to show up for other people as opposed to if my love tank is empty if my self-love is low then I'm doing things perhaps with expectations of receiving in return. When that's not happening, I'm feeling resentful and all that is very like negative low vibration feeling within ourselves, and ultimately, it's not the type of connection that we're searching for, right? To me self-love – and I'll say that if I can to give you a definition of self-love – one of the folks I've seen written about it the most, who wrote about the most is a psychologist and philosopher Erich Fromm, and he wrote a book called *The Art of Loving*, I believe. It was like in the five different types of love, I believe. It's like it's a hundred-page book, and it's really easy to read, and it talks about like five different types of love, like a love for God, a love from your parents. It talks about like a brotherly love – and that's more like a friendship kind of feeling – but he also talks about this love for self, and it's this idea of caring for, respecting of yourself and your actions in the way that you're going about your life, and it's this stagnant – for me, I think it really is a stagnant way of being, so when there are adversities and when we have to be resilient, right, self-love is so important, but even when things are going great, right, like self-love is still a constant thing, and it's, I think, it's actually tied to other emotions that when we are in a state of self-love we actually experience calm and joy, and we're able to be more aware for these other opportunities to opt in to connection, right?

Saintsing: Yeah.

Ziemer: But I think – if I can just say – I think there's a myth I'd really like to bust actually about self-love, which is I think oftentimes there is this, there's this idea that emerged I think in the 80s maybe, or the 90s – I'm blanking on my timeframe right now – came out of the self-help movement which is, which was to say that like before, before you can love anyone else or anyone can really love you that you have to love yourself first, right? So, which for me I find problematic in a lot of ways. I feel like it doesn't really encapsulate the full story. I think that when we are really loving ourselves, sure I think perhaps we're choosing better partners or choosing better relationships that are healing and wonderful for us, right? But, I think – and I see this in this self-love movement right now – that kind of happens in pop culture that puts such an onus or a burden on people to really like, there's almost a perfectionism tendency of,

like, I need to get to self-love. Otherwise I'm not good enough, and yeah, and this idea of like not being good enough, that's truly not self-love anyway, right? It really is a self-accepting piece, and so, I think the second part of this, also this myth I want to bust, is that, you know, we are wired for social connection, right? There are researchers, and Brené Brown has talked about this. Matthew Lieberman talks about this, and like an actual brain part of our brain literally is like wired to connect, and so, if I go back to this idea of self-love that, when we are opting into relationships and connection with people, that it can the reciprocal nature can be so healing within ourselves that we don't have to first achieve this like unachievable self-love before we can get into relationships with other people, okay? So, did I explain myself okay there?

Saintsing: Yeah, you, so you're saying that self-love has this requirement that you accept yourself as you are, right? Which I guess is true of any sort of love, right?

Ziemer: Yeah.

Saintsing: Whether it's directed inward or outward, right, there's this acceptance to it.

Ziemer: Lovely, yeah.

Saintsing: And so, you're saying that people tend to view self-love as something that they earn from themselves.

Ziemer: Yeah, yeah, I think that's a great. Right. There's this like earning quality, and I think that's really well said. That it's like, to earn implies I have to do, to do, to obtain, obtain, obtain as opposed to like self-love just is because I exist, because you exist right here right now, right? And, that's my like mindfulness piece kind of tapping in there a little bit, but it just is.

Saintsing: Yeah.

Ziemer: It's, it's been interesting when I talk to – so my own research interest about like what am I actually studying for my PhD, because I'm a social worker, I'm also very much interested in like interventions like what can we do alongside our clients, alongside our community. What can we do in tandem with them to kind of get them this outcome that they're looking for. So, perhaps it's like feeling better about themselves if they're experiencing depression for example, right?

Saintsing: Right.

Ziemer: And, with self-love I started thinking about, is there a self-love intervention that would be really interesting to try out and study in some way from this like scientifically rigorous procedure for a scientific research method, right? And, when I started talking to people about, there's a common one that is spoken about in self-help, and I've also found it prevalent in addiction communities in like rehab, for example, where you look at yourself in the mirror you make, you literally make eye contact with yourself in the mirror, and you say something positive about yourself. So, I prefer that it's not statements related to like your physical appearance

because I do think that it could take like a narcissistic trend, but we're really thinking about like a self-affirming statement, like I'm a good friend or even – I think and really I'm such a fan of this is – really just telling yourself that you love yourself. So, saying like I love you in the mirror while you're making eye contact with yourself. To me, to love, to love somebody else is to say like, I see you, and so self-love, you're really like, okay I see you, you know? Like, you're not that bad. Like, you're actually pretty great, and I will tell you that when I've talked to so many people about this, adolescents, I've spoken to clients of mine who are coming to see me wanting to feel better from depression, I've spoken to scholars about this, and so many people, I get two reactions. One is like absolute repulsion about absolutely not. I will not look at myself in the mirror. Like, this is, why would I ever do that, and two, I think going back to this idea that you were talking about. It's almost like confusion about well like why would I even think about myself. Why would I love myself as like this other entity, but I'm so focused on, you know, loving everybody else. That really to love is to love others, right? Like in scholarly research, we talk about one of the definitions of love is like being a trusted caregiver to others. I mean that's a very amended definition, but love is always this other-oriented emotion, and so, self-love, it's like, like why would I, why would I even do that.

Saintsing: It's kind of like awe in some senses. In awe you sort of see something spectacular that makes you see how small you are or how much more there is.

Ziemer: Yeah.

Saintsing: And, in this self-love you have to see yourself as just another person instead of like where love is flowing from, right? But, self-love kind of like makes you realize you're not like the center of the universe or something. That you're, that you're just another person, and that like, that, that makes you more able, as you said in the self-transcendence, to connect with other people, I guess.

Ziemer: I think this is actually why I feel so strongly about self-love is because I think this exact idea that you're talking about is folks who are experiencing depression or addiction, for example right? So, I'm actually, I'm funded. My dissertation is funded through the NIAAA, which is alcohol abuse and I work specifically with the funder here in the Bay Area that alcohol research group. So, oftentimes when we're experiencing addiction or depression we become so tunnel vision in our own mind about what's wrong with ourselves, how things aren't working for me and when we're in depression and addiction, often social isolation is happening it's very difficult to connect to others. And so, I'm such a believer that self-love could have the potential, and this is where I'm curious, right? Like, so from, you know, I'm hearing like my mentors and my advisors' thoughts in my head right now about, you know, sometimes in the scientific world it can almost be a negative to be a believer, right? That, I think like self-love is a super power. But, I really need to employ my like scientifically rigorous, you know, unbiased view so to speak. Let's be curious about this. Could self-love actually be a superpower? As opposed to like approaching this self-love as a superpower, right? So, I should – let me reel it back for a second to say that, however, yes I do feel like, coming back to this point of awe, that, that self-love definitely, I would hypothesize, leads to feelings of awe because of this ability to connect us to other people, and that it gets us out of our own head. I think my greater vision for my research is to

think like how can we employ self-love. It's free. It's accessible, which I like, right, because a lot of these other therapies, cognitive behavioral therapy. Although I'm a believer, you see there's an access issue. If you go to a private practitioner in New York City, it's \$200. I think San Francisco, it's 150, 200. So, my greater vision really would be for people to be able to really continue to cultivate this self-love within themselves.

Saintsing: More specifically, what, what would you say your research for your PhD actually entails?

Ziemer: Yeah, so yeah, thanks to that questions. I think self-love first. I was just kind of thinking of self-love, I think of, is this like umbrella term, this idea that if self-love is an umbrella and the prongs. There are many different prongs. So, to me it's this idea of like self-compassion, which is like when we're judging ourselves, criticizing ourselves, we're able to accept ourselves, you know, amidst that. Self-care, which is like the respecting, doing things, really acting caring towards ourselves. This self-esteem idea, right, that we feel competent about ourselves. So, so the reason that I say this kind of umbrella term is because there's little research out there right now that that actually includes self-love, certainly how I know it to be true in these in therapeutic communities, for example. So, I'm so fascinated by, I'll say, phenomena of self-love in popular science in like the Psychology Today blogs, on social media. Like, if you go to Instagram and you type in #selflove, you get 32 million posts on Instagram. Google, you Google self-love, you get three billion returns. So, something is happening out there. What is it? So, I think what the, to me, the intriguing pieces. So, before I can go ahead and develop an intervention, right, even though I really want to jump to that phase, we know that a PhD that you have to take little bits by bits, right? That is actually talking about a career-long pursuit. So, it really, my own research really is conceptualizing this idea of self-love in these lay theory views. So, when I say lay theory I don't mean like scholars who have already written about self-love. I mean people who are on Instagram, and they're posting about self-love, so right now I'm in the process of thinking about perhaps analyzing Instagram posts to see how people, what sort of images people are posting when they're doing #selflove, and specifically within the context of like addiction and sobriety and recovery and that, so where these two worlds of like self-love and addiction intersects and how are people and these lay communities, you know, these therapists, everyday people, how are they talking about self-love? I'm really curious to kind of dig through that because I see, I do see some posts that could be it seen as narcissism, right? Right? I see posts that are very much moving away from this like self-care realm. So, so self-care really is rooted in this like black feminist queer theory, Audre Lorde. This idea that like you're taking care of yourself so that you can show up for the collective, and this really activist mentality to now this transition of like #selfcareday Starbucks ad with your Frappuccino, whatever. On the beach, #selfcare, right? This is like commoditization, right, of self-care, and people there's you know, so there's, there's like #selfcare, #selflove, but what are we really talking about here? And, I'm so curious to kind of capture some of that, to also include therapists' voices, people in recovery to kind of see like, what, what is this idea of, of self-love to them?

Saintsing: Okay, so you draw on psychology, sociology, lots of different research techniques.

Ziemer: Yeah, behavioral health.

Saintsing: Yeah, so would you say that's generally true? People who are getting PhDs in the School of Social Welfare, that this is really interdisciplinary?

Ziemer: Yeah, what a lovely question. Yes, thank you for saying that. This is why I love social work so much by the way. I really love the social work profession because I do feel like you know in this applied profession we really are always working in these interdisciplinary environments, right? If you're like a clinician working in a hospital you're working with doctors and nurses and psychiatrists for example, right?

Saintsing: Right.

Ziemer: And so, I think the beauty of this PhD at Berkeley in the Social Welfare Department has so much been about the freedom to connect with other professors and other departments. It's, so in public health for example I've connected with some professors there or some psychology whether it's emotions research or like adolescent development psychopathology for example. So, and I have, yeah, I have you know lovely people in my cohort who are bridging the gap with like anthropology, criminology, for example, so yeah, education. It's really, it's cool.

Saintsing: And, you knew that you wanted to be a social worker right out of college?

Ziemer: I took a very interesting path. I think I always knew, like in high school, I always was intrigued by the psychology profession, and yeah, I was, I was thought, you know, I'm so drawn to like authenticity and people's lives. Like, what's really happening, you know? I always was drawn to that, but when I was in college, I went to the University of Wisconsin, and they had a great business school, and so, I got a business degree, and I actually, my family, I come from, you know, a long line of people who are in the business world. My dad had been in sales for so long. My brother's in sales now. My mom was, you know, this is like badass. I don't know if I'm allowed to say that. Badass in the corporate world. So, it was always kind of an influence for me, and I did, I was a consultant, an IT consultant, but I realized, like, yeah, I need to, I felt like there was something, my soul was dying. I really wanted to pursue something that I was so excited and curious about, so yeah, about eight years ago I got my Masters in Social Work. I started my MSW program in New York City. That coincided too with some things that were happening in my family, and it just felt like the right time to like leave the corporate world and dive into the Social Work arena.

Saintsing: And then, you, you got your masters, and then you worked a little while as a social worker, right?

Ziemer: Yeah, so I did my MSW. It's a two-year program, and then I was working in New York City for three years at an after school, like a high school Support Program. It was an after-school program, and it was, I mean, I learned so much. It was incredible. I have such love. It's, the program is to reach youth and it's a working at a public high school in Brooklyn, and I think there, maybe, I don't know, our team was maybe ten people or something, and I have such love

to this day for these people that I worked with. I mean the environment was so fun. Like, you – we were, we were working with teenagers, teenagers who didn't have a lot of resources at their disposal. I mean this is like a New York City public-funded high school. It's what, the school's we were working with were like C grades, so the way that New York City rates their schools like ABC, so we were a C school, and that means people that I worked with, the strategies they were using were so creative to get these young people what they needed while also providing such a safe space for these young people to learn about themselves. And so, I was actually, I was doing therapy with kids who are high-risk, so who were at risk for suicide, who were just really having a hard time academically or at home and whatnot, but it was such a fun environment. I mean people were so authentic, and I mean, I don't know your experience with young people, but young people, they can sense when you BS. And so, you really have no other choice but to show up authentically, right? And it was such a gift really to work there.

Saintsing: So, that was a great experience, and what I guess drove you... I – most people in social work, or if you're a professional, I guess, you mostly just need the masters, and then, you could do the work. What drove you onward to the doctorate?

Ziemer: Yeah, yeah, so, so I think there were two things. So, one was I would run, every Monday afternoon, I'd run a girl's group. So, like 16-, 17-year-olds. They would come, and we would talk about all the things. Whatever they wanted to talk about, and I was finding a lot of the girls were expressing such anger, and this anger of just like what was just happening in life but then you know the microcosm of like the school environment and Facebook and people calling each other out and you know subliminal subs that were being thrown on Facebook for example, that would then transfer to the school day the next day. And, there would be fights, and girls would get suspended, and so, when I started talking to them about anger and what anger did for them and getting to fight, it really, getting into a fight is a release, right? Like, your adrenaline's so high and you punch someone out or you do something like, you feel better but it's instantaneous because any of these long-term consequences of getting suspended, your parents finding out, what not, right? Right, so I'd say to them like, yeah what are strategies? How can I – literally I was like what are some strategies that we can use in order to kind of sort through all the different feelings that anger brings? Because ultimately anger is powerlessness, like we get angry when we feel powerless, and so, I started investigating mindfulness. Mindfulness was really just becoming a thing. This was like 2014. At least that was when I first started hearing about it, and so, I would try to understand like, what is this mindfulness? How do I use it? So, mindfulness really is, a definition from Jon Kabat-Zinn in the simplest form that I like, is this idea of non-judgmentally noticing, so like noticing that I got really pissed when someone posted something on Facebook about me that may not be true and like then taking the breath in the pause before I respond, before I respond something nasty to someone on Facebook or want to punch them out the next day for example, right? When you're talking to adolescents, this pause is very difficult because you're also talking about like an age in development where you have impulsivity, and like they're trying to figure out who they are? So, I started diving into this mindfulness. I thought like this could really work, but I was so, mindfulness research was so new at the time. I think it really hit its peak around like 2016 in terms of like the amount of journals are published on it like exponentially increased. So, I knew that, how mindfulness is being talked about in terms of the population, I was working with, so

people who were coming from primarily like black and brown communities, lower socioeconomic having toxic stress, mindfulness felt very like white, waspy, affluent. Part one. Part two was I couldn't figure out what are these mindfulness techniques and how can we actually apply them to adolescence. So, I am getting interested in that and started reading all that I could and figured I really wanted to work on interventions for adolescents that were geared around mindfulness to these specific populations I talked about where I felt like there was such a lack of evidence at that point for these groups, so that was part one. Part two: around the same time, I read an op-ed piece in The New York Times written by Dr. Keltner here in psychology, and it was, what is – something like, What is the Emotion of Awe, and I thought that sounds like, what is awe? And, how should I get to know this person? Who is this person? Which then started, for me, like a flurry of googling UC Berkeley, and I knew I wasn't going to be do PhD in Psych, but I found a professor here, Valerie Shapiro, who's my advisor and has been so lovely navigating this PhD world with me. She's a prevention and implementation science researcher here in School of Social Welfare, and she had a study examining social emotional learning programs here in elementary schools in California, so like teaching little kids about empathy for example. So, I thought, oh that's like emotion, and it has to do with like kids and in schools. Like, even though my interests aren't completely aligned, let me reach out to her and see if I could work with her. So, that's kind of how I came to study. My two main areas really have been mindfulness and then positive emotions, specifically now self-love but in this greater context of you know these social problems, like social isolation, depression, addiction and yeah.

Saintsing: So, unfortunately, it's been a lot of fun, but we're coming up towards our time limit. Usually at the end of the interview we'll take a minute to offer guests a chance to address the audience about anything that they'd like to talk about. Oftentimes, people talk about like social issues or some things specific to their research.

Ziemer: I think, well one thing I want to say for sure is that I think I just want to do a shout out of gratitude as I've been really developing this idea of self-love, I have been working with an undergrad in the Social Welfare Department, Joyce, who's really has helped me kind of start thinking about all this like self-care and self-compassion and where all these terms kind of intersect and cataloging these different Instagram posts to figure out like, yeah, what, what really is self-love and how people are talking about it. So, I wanted to do a shout out to her, and then, I think, you know, lastly, I guess I would say that I think for me I think it's such an important point to hit home is that for me self-love really isn't a selfishness, but it really is, and it's not this like me-focused thing, but it really is in this idea of continuing to like connect and show up as our authentic selves with others, so I think it has some serious healing power behind it. So, we'll see. Yeah, more will be revealed.

Saintsing: We all look forward to the results of your research. Thank you so much. Today I've been speaking with Kelly Ziemer from the School of Social Welfare. We've been speaking about her research on positive emotions and the potential therapeutic benefits of self-love. Thank you so much for being on the show, Kelly.

Ziemer: Oh, thank you for having me. This is lovely.

Saintsing: Tune in in two weeks for the next episode of The Graduates.