

Title: Ellen Hendriksen on Maintaining Your Sanity in Academia
Episode: 42

Transcript

[From Heterodox Academy, this is *Half Hour of Heterodoxy*, conversations with scholars and authors, ideas from diverse viewpoints and perspectives. Here's your host Chris Martin.]

Chris Martin: Welcome to a special holiday episode of *Half Hour of Heterodoxy*. Dr. Ellen Hendriksen, my guest on today's episode, is host of the *Savvy Psychologist Podcast*. It's one of the most popular podcasts on mental health and it was picked as a best new podcast of 2014.

Ellen is a Boston-based clinical psychologist and author of [*How to be Yourself: Quiet Your Inner Critic and Rise Above Social Anxiety*](#). We will be talking about how to maintain your sanity in academia, which I hope is useful to all our listeners, but especially those who were doing heterodox research on contentious topics.

Hi Ellen. Thanks for joining us.

Ellen Hendriksen: Thanks so much for having me, Chris.

Chris Martin: So we are going to talk about lots of challenges that you can face if you're in academic and you're trying to maintain your sanity in an environment that's full of debates and contentious dialogue. So let's start with the topic of how to deal with sarcastic people because there are quite a few of those.

Now that I would ever use sarcasm myself.

Ellen Hendriksen: No, never.

Chris Martin: Never, of course. But if you're doing research that other people don't like or they don't like your findings, one thing you might face is sarcasm. So what tips do you have if you're let's say doing a job presentation or job talk at a new university or just doing a regular talk and people are sarcastic because they don't like your findings?

Ellen Hendriksen: Sure. So I guess – let me start out by saying that sarcasm isn't necessarily all bad. Like it can be used to compliment someone. So my go-to example is saying something like, “Oh, you majored in applied math? Oh, you're a real slacker,” or something like that.

So sarcasm can be used to be self-deprecating or to compliment people. But yes, it often is used for nefarious purposes. So especially when we are at the receiving end of that, it can really hurt. So the definition of sarcasm or essentially how you can tell something is sarcastic is that the content of what is being said is the opposite of the tone that is being used. So those two things are incongruent.

So for instance, if someone were to say to you, “Wow! That’s really original,” then that tone and that content are congruent whereas if someone were to say, “Wow, that’s really original,” then you know that that’s sarcasm because the tone and the content are different.

All right. So if we are unfortunate enough to encounter sarcasm during a talk or in feedback or from a colleague, so there are a number of things we can do.

So one is to answer them literally because sarcasm is fundamentally supposed to be a joke, right? So to – you can kind of turn it on its head by playing dumb, doing kind of a Columbo move and pretending that you didn’t understand it.

So if you’re faced with that comment I mentioned before, like “Wow, that’s original,” you could say, “Thank you so much. Yeah, I worked really hard on this research. I think this offers some new findings and let me tell you why.”

So you could kind of drive over it with a literal answer.

Chris Martin: So does that work well at one-on-one conversations and in groups?

Ellen Hendriksen: You could. I think it’s all – this is all kind of a mix and match to the person that you’re talking to and the – what’s happening in the moment. So certainly use some good judgment. I wouldn’t give any of these as hard and fast rules. But they are tools to put in your toolbox and take out as needed.

So I guess the second strategy is to simply ignore them. So folks who are sarcastic habitually are often kind of grumpy and are often – you know, like will – folks who put time and energy into putting you down or to trying to get a rise out of you, that’s – as we say in psychology, that’s diagnostic.

So if you can tell that they want you to feel as miserable as they do because misery doesn’t just love company, misery loves miserable company, simply ignore them. Like let it slide off your back and maybe even try to dig deep down and feel some compassion for them. Say like, “Wow, they must be really miserable or really lonely to have to be so prickly.”

So that’s a nice way to try to deal with it and then finally, this might not work for everyone. But if you’re willing to meet it head on, you can give them some – essentially some free advice and say, “You know, I think – I appreciate your sense of humor. It’s wickedly sharp. You have a nice sense of like – of sarcasm. However, I know you don’t mean to be hurtful. But sometimes that comes across as hostile. So I’m guessing that’s not what you mean by this one. I just want to give you some feedback.”

So you can address it head on and talk about the comment more as the process. Like that was hurtful as opposed to trying to deal with the content. So those are some ways that we can try to deal with those sarcastic folks that we come across either in the academy or just in life.

Chris Martin: When you were in grad school, can you think of instances when you could have used any of those? Because there's a particular dynamic when you're a junior person.

Ellen Hendriksen: There is. I think for me, dealing with sarcastic people was less of a problem and I think – I was lucky enough to go to a graduate program that was largely supportive and encouraging. I think later on in my career, I faced – like we all do. You know, criticism with my work or just the – it was in the air that somehow all the junior people were incompetent. So trying to not internalize that was my particular challenge.

Chris Martin: Fair enough. So on a related note, what about dealing with your political opposite? That's not necessarily a topic that involves sarcasm but it could get into sarcasm. It could just be very contentious. So you had a recent episode with Jeanne Safer about how to do that. Can you talk a bit about that?

Ellen Hendriksen: Sure. So just a little bit of background. So Jeanne Safer is a psychotherapist in New York City and she's lovely. She's a character and she has been in practice for gosh, 40 years, maybe more. So she's a liberal democrat and she is married to a conservative republican. He is not just any conservative republican. He is one of the editors of the National Review.

But they have been happily married for I think 45 years and we talked about how to live with your political opposite and especially –

Chris Martin: And this episode aired about a week or two ago, correct?

Ellen Hendriksen: It was a few weeks ago. Yeah, yeah, and I enjoyed talking to her very much. She also hosts a podcast titled "I Love You But I hate Your Politics". So that's a nice old shout out for her.

Chris Martin: I should check that out.

Ellen Hendriksen: Yeah, yeah, it's good. It's good. And so she talks a lot about looking for the other thing that you have in common, the other things that bind you together. So for instance, for her and her husband, she talks about their love of music and also just their shared values, their mutual respect for each other, their intellectual discussions.

So looking for all the other things besides politics that you can agree on. So that's – I think that's a really nice, again, tool to put in your toolbox, to remember that it can be hard in these times to not write someone off certainly if they disagree with you. But – because that seems to be the MO for whatever reason.

But to broaden the spotlight, to not just have it shine upon political differences but to broaden it and see everything else that makes up this particular person.

Chris Martin: That actually gels with something we covered in a previous episode here. It was about three episodes ago with [Lucía Martínez Valdivia](#) who talked about how at the end of graduate level, undergraduates may have a variety of identities and a variety of characteristics.

But one thing they share in common is they're all students. They're all eager to learn. They all know they have a lot to learn in college because it's different from high school.

So that is something they all have in common. They're not encouraged necessarily to think about much.

Ellen Hendriksen: Yeah. I think something that most adults can agree on is that – no matter your political stripes, everybody believes in working hard and like following your dream.

So I think that is something that we can all agree on and can be a way to connect in a conversation with the political opposite and to find some common ground.

Chris Martin: So in a situation that's not a marriage but let's say it's a conversation with someone at a party, someone you just met, the only recent examples where you discovered was your political opposite and you were able to use these tactics or ...

Ellen Hendriksen: So I live – for better or worse, I live in Cambridge, Massachusetts. So I've been the bluest of blue bubbles. But that said, I have family from all stripes and all – lots of life. So some of it is a little bit of tiptoeing. We know when we're getting into territory. That will probably lead to disagreement and sometimes that's OK and we can do that and still be respectful and sometimes we just stop and talk about something else like the kids or the dog or something that is politically neutral. So it can take some navigation. But I think we're all practicing that.

Chris Martin: OK. So another issue is when you're having a debate, sometimes – especially if it's not about you personally. You can take something personally. When you're doing research, you should be focused on your research findings. But a comment about your findings could be something you take personally and you wrote a Scientific American article on how to not take things personally. So what advice would you have for academics who are – whether graduate students or professors who are prone to do that?

Ellen Hendriksen: Sure, yeah. I guess this is where we can link back. You asked me if I had dealt with sarcastic people in graduate school and my answer was, "No, not really." But I did struggle with not taking things personally. So I think here is where it – that resonated with me.

So there are two sides to this. So on the one side, we often say – the prevailing wisdom is it's not you, it's them. Like that something is wrong with the people who are harshly criticizing you and sometimes that is true and academics is full of egos and characters and eccentrics who may not be the greatest socially. So one thing –

Chris Martin: Right, especially in fields like psychology and sociology, which are filled with people who are very puzzled by how other people are behaving.

Ellen Hendriksen: It's so true. It's so true. Yes. And so one thing you can do is certainly to consider the source and so if the critique comes from someone who you like and respect, that might make you sit up and say, "Oh, maybe I should do a course correction here."

But if it's someone who doesn't know you well, someone who has been known to shoot their mouth off, someone who has all the subtlety of a brick, someone who is – has a reputation for being curmudgeonly, then that can help you decide whether this is feedback that you should take or if this is feedback that you can just leave at the door.

So just because somebody says it doesn't mean it's true certainly and you get to decide whether to listen to it or not. So even if it gets said, ultimately you have the power to choose whether to accept it or reject it. I think that is a really nice way to kind of reclaim the insult or whatever is being levied at you and to be able to take some power back there.

Now, so that's the – it's them side. But there is also the sometimes "It's us" side. So for me, like I am of a sensitive nature and so something that hangs together with being a little bit sensitive is often having a very strict moral code, like having a very strong moral compass, which is important certainly but can – but it can have a downside where if we – you know, there's a criticism levied at us or something to that extent.

It can be very easy for us to say like that – she can't say that! Like how dare she? That's wrong! Like to see the act as something wrong in and of itself. Like this is not how things should be. But I think if we get caught up in that, like even if that shouldn't have been said, it still was said.

So getting stuck in the – you know, shouldn't or the can't. We still have to deal with it. So I think that we need to remember that getting offended and feeling all indignant isn't necessarily helpful. So that we can – you know, certainly we can rage against the unfairness of it all. But then it's important to move on.

So that is where you can use what I talked about before. You consider the source and see if this is really something you want to take to heart, if this is constructive criticism or if this is just someone kind of running their mouth.

Chris Martin: When you say that, you mean it's – you should let it go as opposed to holding on to resentment for a long time, which actually occupies your own time.

Ellen Hendriksen: Exactly, exactly. So what's the quote? Like resentment is like swallowing the poison and expecting the other person to die. It doesn't help us and it doesn't punish the person who did you wrong anyway.

Chris Martin: Right, yeah. There's another quote about forgiveness. It's forgiveness is like letting a bird go free and then realizing the bird was you or letting a bird out of a cage and then realizing that bird was you.

Ellen Hendriksen: That makes sense.

Chris Martin: Yeah. Yeah, I talked about forgiveness a bit during my happiness class and there's some good research out there now on how to – if you really want to forgive someone, which you don't know how, you can follow a step-by-step process. It's – let me think. It's

Everett Worthington's research at VCU He has got a free workbook online. So I like his work. He approaches it from both a religious and non-religious angle too. So he's a Christian. So he talks about how from a – some of his books are written from a Christian perspective on the importance of forgiveness. But some of his books are also just a secular perspective on how to be more forgiving and less resentful.

Ellen Hendriksen: So I think to riff on that for a second, I think that something else we can do is to – OK. So as academics, we're often perfectionistic. Like we often like want to do things right and well and are conscientious and so – but there is a big overlap between perfectionism and like not being very good at taking feedback because we – when we get – like the feedback, like it kind of blows away all we've worked so hard for.

So I think we can reframe this. We can reframe getting negative feedback as perfectionists by folding it into the perfectionism. You can say, "OK, I'm going to get better at receiving criticism. I am going to improve this and get better at it. So that I can even be a high achiever when it comes to getting criticism."

But another thing to do – and this is the opposite and you can kind of do this at the same time, which is a little odd. But you can also try to accept your imperfection. It's really hard to loosen one's grip. It feels dangerous. But acknowledging that you're not perfect and accepting that can be really empowering and make that criticism sting less because then it will not cut so deep.

Chris Martin: Yeah. I think your mindset also helps. I mean talking about perfectionism, I think some of that comes also from a sense of wanting to outrank other people and getting a sense of self-esteem from your level of performance as opposed to your absolute mastery. So your relative performance means you need to outrank other people and trying to focus it more on mastery. So not whether you have published at more top journals than your colleagues, but rather whether you were doing better than you were doing last year or two years ago, whether you've learned more since then.

Ellen Hendriksen: That's a fantastic tip.

Chris Martin: So getting back to politics for just a few moments.

Ellen Hendriksen: Sure.

Chris Martin: How do you deal with today's news overload and just deal with today's political climate more broadly?

Ellen Hendriksen: Oh my goodness. That is a \$64,000 question, isn't it?

Chris Martin: Right.

Ellen Hendriksen: Yes. So, OK, so I'm a clinical psychologist. So I really gravitate towards applied tips and techniques like try this, like let's do this. So I am an anxiety specialist and one of the tools we have for folks with generalized anxiety disorder is this thing called "worry time"

where if worries arise during the day, we have them ask themselves, “Do I need to deal with this right now?” and if the answer is yes, then go do that. But if the answer is no, we have them shunt it to what we call “worry time”. So we have them carve out a particular time during the day in which to worry.

So that could be their commute home or it could be right before dinner or whatever they choose and so you can apply this to the news cycle and news overload because with our phones and with monitors everywhere we go, from the airport to restaurants, to waiting rooms, everything, like we’re just being inundated with news all day long.

So to the extent we can control it, I would say to institute news time. So instead of like checking the news every time you look at your email or every time you look at your phone or clicking on that notification that pops up to designate a time and space to consume the news and so you could think of it as rather than snacking all day long, OK, you’re going to eat three meals or rather than running yourself ragged all day long, this is your workout.

So to circumscribe the time that you spend looking at the news. So that’s my biggest tip and certainly just another thing to do is to just unsubscribe to all this stuff that comes at you, to narrow it down to the sources that are important to you. You know, whether or not you agree with them.

There’s so much advice out there to say – you know, to not only subscribe to the news sources that you agree with but also to at least one or two that you don’t to get the other point of view and also quite honestly to confuse your social media algorithms, so they don’t just keep you in a bubble and send you the things that they think – that the algorithm thinks you’re going to like.

So to filter ruthlessly and – because that wouldn’t – when the news is drowning you out, like you can bail out your metaphorical boat by just cutting down the amount of information that is coming in.

Chris Martin: Yeah. I’ve actually thought about deleting Twitter from my cell phone and that’s difficult to do. But I may do it one of these days just for my own sanity.

Ellen Hendriksen: Sure. Well, I mean you can always reinstall, right? When I was feeling a little bit burned out, maybe about a year ago, I found myself in an unfortunate like YouTube habit when I was supposed to be working. I just deleted it from my phone and then once I got myself in a better place, I reinstalled it and now it’s fine. It’s not tempting anymore.

But I think if there is an app that is clearly impeding our life or clearly sucking our attention and time away, just get rid of it. You can always install it again later.

Chris Martin: Yeah. I’m trying to convince my wife to turn off the thing that actually gives her notifications of news. So it actually causes her phone to ping.

Ellen Hendriksen: Yeah.

Chris Martin: And she picks it up and there's some news there.

Ellen Hendriksen: Exactly.

Chris Martin: It's a push-oriented system. Yeah. When I was doing research on my dissertation, I was talking to a therapist at college counseling centers about what might cause the anxiety to be going up among college students and they said when they were younger – so these were people who are now about 50 or 60 years old. When they were younger, there was a natural bubble in college because there was one phone on the hallway and there were no TVs in dorm rooms. So you were insulated from the external world to some degree. You had to consume it in small, healthy doses.

Ellen Hendriksen: Yeah, no, and I think in addition to just the sheer volume of news making us anxious, I think the fact that we can control what we consume so tightly, like we can easily get lost in a rabbit hole of our own control for hours online.

So if we are not looking at or being faced with news or viewpoints or even things that we're not particularly interested in, we are not as good at dealing with uncertainty or ambiguity or like just anything that we haven't had hand curated. So that uncertainty drives anxiety.

So I think when we're used to being in total control all the time, whether it's being able to look at the restaurant menu beforehand online or know exactly where we're going because of Google Maps or not have to talk to somebody to ask how to do a household chore because we can just look it up on YouTube, then that drives the anxiety because we have less experience under our belts in knowing that we can navigate uncertainty, that we know how to ask a stranger for directions if we get lost or we know how to think on the fly, that we can walk into a party having not checked the guest list on Evite before and just deal with whoever is there and start some conversations.

So I think the fact that we can control our consumption so tightly is also driving anxiety.

Chris Martin: Yeah, and Robert Wright whom I interviewed maybe six or seven months ago has a newsletter called "A Mindful Resistance Newsletter" jumping back to the topic of politics.

The goal of the newsletter is first to phrase things in a more balanced way. So not to phrase things in a way that actually raises your ire but just sort of objectively describes current political scandals and what the risks are and how they might be resolved.

They took a break over the summer. So I think I interviewed him in May and he took a break and the newsletter is back and it's free. I'm not involved in the writing or production of it in any way. But I do like it.

So any other tips before we wrap up on how to deal with academic job stress, especially if you're doing contentious research but just in general?

Ellen Hendriksen: Just in closing, I would say for folks, especially young academics, we often think we have to go into our first job or our department and exude competence and confidence.

Interestingly – so this is Susan Fiske and Amy Cuddy’s work before Amy Cuddy was doing power posing. They found that for first impressions, the thing that people pay closest attention to in first impressions is warmth and that is defined as simply being kind and sincere and trustworthy and so I think that that knowledge that – you know, the competence and confidence can come later. But at first, simply try to be a good colleague.

If you’re trying to make tenure to be – just be yourself and be someone who is interested in your colleagues, who is a team player and is warm, is friendly and because essentially tenure does absolutely have to do with your accomplishments but also has to do with, “Is this somebody who I want to be colleagues with for the rest of my life?” and so to certainly focus on your work, focus on doing the best quality research you can, but also – especially at the beginning, to focus on being kind and that is something we can all do and will get you a long way.

So that’s a final wrap-up that I think we often forget but is so important.

Chris Martin: I think that’s great advice. It also reminds me of Adam Grant’s work on being a giver, so being kind by actually being generous and making sure part of your work is simply helping other people out of general interest in their work.

Ellen Hendriksen: Absolutely.

Chris Martin: Yeah. Well, thank you for joining us and happy holidays.

Ellen Hendriksen: Of course. Happy holidays to you too. Appreciate it.

[Music]

Chris Martin: Ellen’s podcast is the *Savvy Psychologist*. Her website is www.EllenHendriksen.com and you can find her on Twitter, @EllenHendriksen. Her book is called “How to be Yourself: Quiet Your Inner Critic and Rise Above Social Anxiety”.

My next guest on the show is historian Kevin Kruse. We will be talking about his book *Fault Lines* co-authored with Julian Zelizer. The book covers the history of the United States since 1974. If you have any comments about today’s episode, you can contact me at podcast@heterodoxacademy.org or tag me on Twitter, @ChrisMartin76. Thanks for listening and happy holidays.

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