



Todd B. Kashdan

Award for Distinguished Scientific Early Career Contributions to Psychology

Citation

“For bold and insightful contributions to the study of individual differences across the spectrum of human experience. Todd B. Kashdan’s research has bridged the areas of emotional difficulties and psychological strengths to create new models of how ineffective emotion regulation strategies and deficits in positive experiences function to transform normative social nervousness into pathological social anxiety. He has challenged conventional wisdom, used dynamic and naturalistic research methods, and revealed how curiosity, meaning and purpose, and psychological flexibility are critical for a well-lived life.”

Biography

Todd B. Kashdan was born in Mineola, New York. Taking full advantage of the two-minute lead on his twin brother Andrew, Todd absorbed enough of the world that they would never be on the same page again. However, their prenatal adventures ensured a lifetime bond in which months could go by without a single word shared between them and yet nothing would change.

At the age of two, his parents divorced. A few years later, Kashdan’s father abruptly ended contact. In his early teenage years, Kashdan’s mother Roxanne died of breast cancer, and his grandmother Selma raised him. As a dominant force on Wall Street, in a time period when the glass

ceiling for women was near the ground, Selma was tough. When one of her grandchildren came home with a 98 test grade, Selma dwelled on the two lost points. She had a profound impact on his personality, teaching him how to become an independent thinker with an intense goal-directed focus and a strong ability to bounce back from adversity. Unfortunately, it would be quite some time before these personality traits would be applied to work. Until then, he put all of his energy into discovering punk and hardcore rock bands and living most of his young adulthood inside a sweaty mosh pit.

However, this passionate pursuit was insufficient for Kashdan’s hypomanic energy. He went on a quest to find at least one sport that he could enjoy and excel at. After experimenting with football and wrestling, he developed a love affair with the shot put. The sport requires one person to throw a 12-pound metallic sphere as far as possible from a seven-foot diameter circle, with nobody else to depend on or to blame. It was perfect for Kashdan except that none of his high school track and field coaches had experience training shot putters. Undeterred, Kashdan purchased frame-by-frame photographs of German and Russian champions and learned the biomechanics of an effective shot put glide, spin, and throw. All of this culminated with the shot put record at his high school and an invitation to the New York State finals. He also discovered the near perfect inverse relationship between this obsession and popularity.

In an attempt to follow in his grandmother’s footsteps, and those of several cousins, Kashdan went to college with plans to be the next Gordon Gecko on Wall Street. Both twins attended Cornell University, where they spent exactly 10.5 hours together over the course of three years. He spent a semester working on the New York Stock Exchange floor, and after graduating, he continued working as a specialist’s assistant for Spear, Leeds & Kellogg. Kashdan learned a great deal about power, persuasion, and money while collecting interesting stories during adventures in New York City’s underground. Despite the thrill, he found the work to be rather meaningless and turned to reading psychology books for intellectual stimulation. His interest in research was sparked by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi’s (1975) book *Beyond Boredom and Anxiety: Experiencing Flow in Work and Play*. Soon after, Kashdan found research positions with Arthur Aron at Stony Brook University to study how to maintain passion in long-term relationships, and with Jan Loney on parents interacting with children diagnosed with attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder. Aron and Loney were Kashdan’s first role models in psychology of how to generate and test meaningful research questions.

Kashdan began his clinical psychology graduate training at the University at Buffalo in 1998—a time that coincided with Martin Seligman’s introduction of positive psychology during his American Psychological Association presidential address. The timing could not have been any better. Posi-

tive psychology became Kashdan's passion. John Roberts, his advisor at Buffalo, showed great patience in Kashdan's burgeoning interest on the intersection of positivity and psychopathology—allowing him to study positive emotions, curiosity, as well as meaning and purpose in life and to create courses on the science of well-being.

Kashdan was fortunate to find three mentors at Buffalo with a passion for psychological science that was contagious: Lorraine Collins, Frank Fincham, and William Pelham. Collins exposed him to ecologically relevant, momentary assessment approaches for studying emotion generation and regulation in daily life. She also remains his exemplar for how to be a devoted scientist and an ever-present, ever-loving parent. Collins, Fincham, and Pelham provided a scientific sanctuary, as each supported Kashdan's diverse interests and professional development. The three of them spent countless hours delicately challenging his fruitful and inane research ideas and questions, editing rough (sometimes horrid) manuscript drafts, and teaching him how to think and write with greater clarity. Kashdan's success in academia has been heavily influenced by the opportunities that they gave him and the energy that they spent molding him into an independent scholar. These influences were essential, but Kashdan's graduate school survival was a function of finding like-minded classmates, including Juliana Read, David Drenfeld, Andy Lopez-Williams, and Michelle McClellan, friends who relished outdoor hot tubs on snowy evenings, Tuesday drives to Canada to run the blackjack tables, and an infamous eight-hour tennis match that no amount of rain or lightning could stop.

After finishing at Buffalo, Kashdan completed his internship at the Medical University of South Carolina, where he learned from an amazing cadre of clinicians and scholars, including Dan Smith, Ken Ruggerio, John Roitzsch, and his mentor and soon-to-be lifelong friend and collaborator Chris Frueh. Receiving the best clinical training in his career, Kashdan spends a small portion of time each year lobbying his graduate students to attend the same internship site.

He was fortunate that Jim Maddux and June Tangney took a chance on a young, brash graduate student such that in 2004, he obtained an assistant professor position in the Department of Psychology at George Mason University. Instead of pigeonholing him as an anxiety disorder researcher or a social-personality psychologist, the administrators and fellow faculty at George Mason University have always given Kashdan intellectual freedom with his research program. Every reminder of this provides a moment of gratitude.

In his Laboratory for the Study of Social Anxiety, Character Strengths, and Related Phenomena, Kashdan conducts research on the mechanisms underlying why people suffer, with an emphasis on social anxiety and other emotional difficulties, and the nature of well-being, with an emphasis on the critical functions of curiosity, meaning and purpose in life, and psychological flexibility in living a well-lived life.

To advance the public understanding of science, Kashdan has written a trade book titled *Curious? Discover the Missing Ingredient to a Fulfilling Life*, has given a TEDx talk, writes regularly for *Psychology Today* and *The Huffington Post*, has created a smartphone self-help program called Social Success, and has given workshops at organizations such as the Air Force and for corporations including Hormel, General Mills, Gensler, and Gap.

However, the quality and quantity of his contributions are attributable to his hoarding of the greatest collaborators available. Robert Biswas-Diener, Joseph Ciarrochi, Michael Steger, and Patrick McKnight are collaborators who also happen to be four of his most cherished friends. Gallup has found that if someone can check "yes" to the statement "I have a best friend at work" he or she is going to be engaged and productive. With McKnight at his side, Kashdan has been able to check "yes" for years, and, in turn, stressful events bounce off him like gumdrops, and Mondays can be as pleasurable as Saturdays.

Science can be a lonely endeavor. Forging the kind of relationships that energize, inspire, and allow Kashdan to effortlessly be himself has been essential. Without the exceptional students working in Kashdan's lab, he would be much less productive and laughing far less often. The students that continue to shape his work and life include William Breen, Patty Ferssizidis, Nina Farmer, Leah Adams, Evan Kleiman, Alex Afram, Kevin Young, Jessica Yarbrow, Fallon Goodman, Sam Monfort, Daniel Blalock, and many others. His lab is family. Kashdan is also especially grateful for the support, brilliance, wisdom, and playfulness of colleagues that he has hoarded over the years, such as Kirk Brown, Lisa Coyne, Nathan DeWall, Ed Diener, Jon Elhai, Robert Emmons, John Forsyth, Barbara Fredrickson, Jeffrey Froh, Steve Hayes, Stefan Hofmann, Aaron Jarden, Terri Julian, Laura King, Carl Lejuez, Shane Lopez, Nance Lucas, Sonja Lyubomirsky, John Nezelek, Acacia Parks, Chris Peterson, Paul Rogers, Richard Ryan, Ken Sheldon, Paul Silvia, Rick Snyder, Howard Tennen, Gittendre Uswatte, Justin Weeks, Kelly Wilson, and Paul Wong, just to name a few.

Kashdan's wife Sarah is his foundation, the only person who can make him laugh on demand (a power she abuses regularly) and the person who deserves credit for teaching him how to be a man, a father, and a good person. His passionate pursuits are not limited to psychological science, as he devotes sufficient time to push his body beyond its limits with maniacal workouts, mind-bending movies and books, world travel, and whatever his three daughters Raven, Chloe, and Violet want.

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