

Disrupt Yourself Podcast

EPISODE 157: SUSAN DAVID

Welcome to the Disrupt Yourself Podcast, a podcast where we discuss strategies and advice for how to climb the S-curve of learning in your professional and personal life, disrupting who you are to slingshot into who you want to be.

I'm your host, Whitney Johnson, and today our guest is Dr. Susan David, creator of the concept, Emotional Agility, founder and co-director of the Institute of Coaching at Harvard University, one of the world's leading management thinkers, according to Thinkers50 and a TED speaker, where her talk on Emotional Agility has been viewed over three million times.

You may decide that you are going to change jobs, move to another country to physically disrupt yourself, hoping to improve your lot. But based on Susan's 20 years of academic and clinical research, it's how you navigate your inner world, your thoughts, your feelings and self-talk; how you disrupt your mindset that determines how successful you will be. Her [article on Emotional Agility](#) was named the Management Idea of the Year by Harvard Business Review and her [book by the same name](#) has been a number one Wall Street Journal bestseller, USA Today bestseller and Amazon Best Book of the Year..

WHITNEY Welcome, Susan.

SUSAN Thank you. I'm delighted to be with you.

WHITNEY You live in Boston.

SUSAN I do.

WHITNEY You teach at Harvard Medical School. But where did you grow up and what did you want to be when you grow up?

SUSAN Well, I grew up in South Africa a- and as I [describe in my TED talk](#), I grew up in apartheid South Africa as a White South African, growing up, essentially, in a society that was committed to not

seeing the other, to denial. And while, when I was growing up, I didn't know that I wanted to be a psychologist. In fact, I went through a number of difficult experiences that led me drop out of university and then find my way back. I've always had this, really, it's an abiding interest, which is a core question of how is it that we can navigate ourselves effectively so that we can bring the best of who we are forward in all aspects of our lives. And that found its way into me being a clinical psychologist and also working in organizations.

WHITNEY So did you know that you wanted to be a psychologist? I mean like, when you were ... You said you dropped out of university. What were you studying initially?

SUSAN Well, I initially registered in a psychology degree and studying philosophy, but I also did English and Greek and Roman literature.

But I'd had a difficult experience a couple of years prior. Um, when I was around, uh, 16 years old, my father was diagnosed with terminal cancer and he died a couple of months later. And what I experienced, and I think so many of us experience this in different ways is I was internally going through a whole lot of pain and fallout from his death. I mean, he was the closest, most wonderful, compassionate person in my life and I remember him dying on a Friday and me going to school on the Monday. And it was almost this idea that if you just get on with it, that things will be okay.

And so my sense of that period was so many people telling me, "Just be positive. Everything happens for a reason. Everything will be okay." But internally, I was falling apart, I was struggling. And so my dropping out of university was really an extension of that struggle, of me not having a sense of centeredness with who I was and what I was being. And so really, what happens, I think, for so many of us is we have these personal experiences that shape us and those personal experiences often shine a light on how we feel we can bring ourselves to our careers.

And so, ultimately, what I have is the nexus of that, where my study of psychology is not this, you know, abstract thing but it's really trying to recognize what was it that I experienced? What is it that so many of us experience? Are these things helpful? Are they harmful? And what do we know about the psychology of how we navigate ourselves that is really crucial to how we are able to live our best life?

WHITNEY Hmm. So that experience of your father dying really set you off on this path of needing to figure this out.

SUSAN Yes. And actually, a very specific experience that I'll talk about. Because I think it's profoundly, I think, important in terms of our understanding and how we're going to take this conversation, which is, I had a teacher and she knew what I'd gone through. And I recall one day in class her handing out these blank notebooks. And she looked at me and she looked at the class, but I felt like she was talking to me and she said, you know, "These notebooks are yours and what I want you to do in them is to write. Not write what you think you should feel or you should write, but write what you are experiencing." You know, her words really were right; tell the truth. Write like no one is reading.

And what I found in that experience was starting to gradually show up to what was going on for myself, was incredibly therapeutic and incredibly powerful. And we don't often have those opportunities in day-to-day life. In day-to-day life where people tell us, "Just be positive," or "Just grit your way through it," or "Everything happens for a reason." You know, what we stop doing is having this healthy relationship with ourselves and it's when we have a healthy relationship with ourselves that we're able to uncover our values, what our difficult emotions mean to us and how we can actually be more flexible in a complex and fragile world.

WHITNEY You know, it's interesting as I'm hearing you talk and I'm going to ask you to define what emotional agility is in just a moment. But one of the things that I hear you saying and- and I love the paradox of this is that the only way you can be agile is if you're willing to slow down and have the experience of what you're feeling. And that is being quiet and staying with it and after you do that, the agility comes. But it's interesting to me, the paradox around that very seminal experience that you had with that teacher or that professor and what has now become your signature idea and your life's work.

SUSAN Yeah, it, you know, it is a paradox because the idea that is so pervasive in our society is that happiness and positive emotions, so-called positive emotions, are what matter. And that if you think positive emotions, you'll manifest good things and that sounds great on the surface. But in reality, when you look at the research and you look at how people start, then, getting into struggles with their difficult emotions, when they start saying to themselves, "I feel like I'm on the wrong career path, but I shouldn't feel that. I should, you know, be grateful for all the things that I've got."

You know, there's- there's wonder in that sentiment, but what it can often do is it can often lead people to very unhealthy ways of being with themselves, those ways that denote a non-acceptance, that are not compassionate with their self, that are not recognizing of the fact that we are evolving beings and that something that worked for you five years ago, that you were, you know, wanting and putting your hand and form at and not be working for you any longer. And so there are these fundamental ways of being with our difficult experiences that, paradoxically, absolutely make us agile and effective and it's not the typical, "Be positive, grit your way through, everything happens for a reason."

WHITNEY Yeah, it's interesting. I know in reading in your book, you make this statement, "If so many of our emotions are troubling and yet helpful enough to make the cut of natural selection, doesn't that mean these feelings have a purpose?" And I love the, that- that turn of phrase and just that, what that evoked from me when I read that.

SUSAN It's so interesting. You know, if we think about someone who's bored at work, you know, what is that boredom telling you? That boredom is telling you that you've got a value and that value is a value around growth and you're not getting enough of it. You know, if we're feeling angry, our anger is so often a signpost that something that we really value is being threatened. So when we shut ourselves off from difficult emotions, we also shut ourselves off from learning what our values are and then positioning ourselves, most effectively, so that we can move forward in a way that is values congruent. We close ourselves off to that information.

WHITNEY Yeah. And when I hear you say this idea and I want to get in just, into just a moment, have you define for us what emotional agility is. But, uh, the- the thing that's coming up for me is I'm listening to you say, "Okay, so we- we- we do want to be positive because we, if we think about positive things, we will get more of positive and we don't want to dwell on the negative." And yet, what I hear you saying, and I think this is so powerful, is that when the negative comes up, we can't simply ignore it. We need to acknowledge it, because in fact, it is giving us very important, vital to our progress, information.

SUSAN Yes. And the idea that there aren't actually good and bad emotions.

WHITNEY Ah. Ah.

SUSAN You know, and so beyond that, there aren't actually good and bad emotions. There are certain emotions that feel better or feel worse. There are emotions that feel more comfortable and emotions that feel less comfortable. But there aren't good and bad emotions. The idea that there are good and bad emotions, what does that do? It basically sets up into a situation where the so-

called bad emotions need to be pushed aside or done away with. And again, what this does is it gives us a context in which we are non-accepting of the self.

WHITNEY Hmm.

SUSAN And so the first person actually who chose to speak about this was Charles Darwin. Charles Darwin described the idea that all emotions, all emotions, are functional.

WHITNEY Hmm.

SUSAN That emotions serve a purpose. They signal to ourselves what we need. They signal our values. They signal the same things to other people. And so when we move away from this idea of good and bad emotions and rather, we say, you know, our emotions are a natural system inside of us that have developed to help us, almost like a navigational system, that have helped to develop within us so that we can respond effectively. Then now, you're not moving into this judgment about emotions. You're rather being accepting of the self and compassionate of the self. And when we're in a place of acceptance, you know, the paradox again is that change comes through acceptance.

By acceptance, I don't mean passive resignation. I mean it's only when you say, "This is what's going on for me," and you are able to hold that and be with that, that you're then able to move forward effectively. Otherwise, what are we doing? We're in this constant struggle and this constant state of denial.

WHITNEY Mm. I love that. In fact, it's so fun that you brought that up because one of the quotes that I had underlined from your book was, "Acceptance is a prerequisite for change." So I love that you brought that out.

Okay, so we need to feel our emotions. We need to recognize, as you said, Charles Darwin said they are all valuable, but we need to be agile with them. So how did you get this idea of emotional agility and tell us exactly what it is so that we have a quick definition for our listeners.

SUSAN So I came out of doing a PhD on emotions, emotion regulation and what I was finding was that so much of the discussion about whether it's emotional intelligence or emotional, you know, regulation is really about this idea that we've got to control our emotions. And you know, what I'd experienced as a child when I was going through this difficult experience with my dad is that when I was opening myself up to these emotions and when I was accepting of them and when I was developing some skills around those emotions, what this did is it set me up really effectively.

And so what do I mean by emotional agility? Emotional agility at its core is about being able to be, firstly, willing to experience your emotions. By experience, I don't mean because you're angry with your boss, you've got to have a, have it out with the person, okay?

WHITNEY (laugh)

SUSAN And I think that's often a misconception. It's like, I'm not saying because you feel it everyone needs to know about it, you know, wear your heart on your sleeve, like that, okay. What I'm saying is when we, you know, get- get stuck in our lives, it's often because we aren't in a place of acceptance; we're more in a place of struggle.

WHITNEY Hmm.

SUSAN So what is emotional agility? Emotional agility is, firstly, the willingness to say, you know, "This is what's going on for me right now." It might be in a career, it might be in a relationship, it might be that you're feeling a sense of loss because your child is growing up. It might be guilt because you're traveling and you feel like you're a bad parent, okay? Whatever that thing is, the first part of it is basically saying, "This is what I feel," you know, a willingness to feel. So that is really about expanding your heart in a real way from this idea of positive or negative, good or bad, into this is what it is. So emotional agility, the ability to be with our emotions in ways that are compassionate, okay?

WHITNEY Mm.

SUSAN This is what's going on for me. Also, in ways that are-

WHITNEY Wait, say that again. [crosstalk 00:14:47].

SUSAN Yeah, okay. Emotional agility, emotional agility-

WHITNEY Is ...

SUSAN ... being able to be with ourselves, our thoughts, our emotions and our stories, our inner selves, in ways that are compassionate. Okay? This is what-

WHITNEY Boom.

SUSAN ... is, this is what's going on for me.

WHITNEY Okay. Boom, everybody. Boom.

SUSAN Boom. Okay.

WHITNEY I had to say that twice because I didn't want people to kind of like drive by that and not recognize that we all needed to stop and pay attention to that.

SUSAN It's compassion, um-

WHITNEY Yeah.

SUSAN ... it's something that don't talk about a lot or we talk about it, but it feels abstract. Compassion is actually really, really important here. So, compassionate.

The second aspect of emotional agility or if I'm defining it, emotional agility, ability to be with ourselves in ways that are compassionate. Second, curious, okay, curious. I feel bored at work. What is that emotion telling me? I'm feeling really angry in this situation. What is that telling me about what's important? I feel guilty as a parent. What is that guilt telling me? Ah! The guilt is telling that I value presence and connectedness with my children and I don't have enough of it at this moment.

So what we're starting to do is we're starting to move from this idea of, "Oh, it's a good emotion or bad emotion," into the really beautiful idea, which is that our emotions signpost our values. We don't intend to get upset or get angry or fearful or frustrated about stuff we don't care about. So if we just slow down a little bit and we say, "What is this emotion telling me about what's important to me?" Curiosity, we learn so much. Okay?

So compassionate, curious and then the last part of it is, it's all very well being compassionate and curious with ourselves, but we want to be able to make change in our lives. We want to be able to move forward in ways that are active so it's not just that this abstract, you know, strategy that I've got in my head, but I'm actually doing things differently.

And so what do I mean by this? We, again, we live in a world that has so many conflicting messages that come through social media, that come through our KPIs and things that we're told about what we need to be and what we need to believe. What starts to happen over time is we start losing a sense of, "What is it for me? What is enough for me? What's okay for me? What is it that I want here?"

And so a big part of emotional agility is this idea that every single day we have hundreds of what I call choice points. A choice point is, you know, do you reach for the fruit or do you reach for the muffin? Do you bring your cell phone to the table or do you leave it in the drawer? In other words, do you say that you value presence and connectedness, but then we've got this choice point which is, "Whatever I do here and now that allows me to move closer towards my values?"

And so emotional agility, again, you know, if I just have to really sum it up, it's about the ability to be with ourselves in ways that are curious, compassionate and the capacity to take courageous and values-connected steps. Why is this agile? Because what it does is it allows us to connect with ourselves and our needs and the needs of others in the moment, instead of being driven by stories.

You know, stories about, "Oh, I'm so stressed, therefore I, you know, have this habit of always acting in a way that, you know, shuts my family out when they want to connect with me." Or, I've got a value and the value is a value of voice and so now, I'm in an organization and I'm not just thinking, "Oh, no one hears me in this organization. I actually recognize that my value is a value of voice and so I'm looking for ways that I can make small changes, connected with these choice points that bring my voice more consistently to the way that I'm loving and leading and parenting and being." And so that's why agile, because we're not being trapped by thoughts, emotions, stories that don't serve us. Rather, we are connected with who we are and what we want to be and then doing that.

WHITNEY Okay. Excellent. All right. So what I'd like to do now is when you, for those of you who are going to go through the book and read it in detail and it's a really, not only interesting, but every single page, you're like, "Aha, oh. There's another aha." So I recommend that you read it. Susan, could you just walk us through quickly, and you've kind of touched on this, but in terms of giving people sort of these, sort of hooks to- to hang onto, walk us through the five steps in the book. You talk about hooked-

SUSAN Yeah. Yes.

WHITNEY ... speaking of the word hook, showing up, stepping out, walking your why and moving on. You've kind of touched on those, but if you wouldn't mind going through those quickly and then I'd love to do a couple of scenarios of, "What do you do in this situation?"

SUSAN Beautiful. So the first thing that I do talk about is how we get hooked. And what I mean by hooked is how we get, firstly, we get stuck in stories. We get stuck in stories about who we are, whether we're creative, whether we're entrepreneurial or not, whether we, you know, are a leader or not a leader. Even stories, you know, that were written on our mental chalkboards when we were five years old, about whether we deserve to be loved, what kind of lives we deserve. What starts to happen is, you know, these stories are really important. You know, we all need these stories, we all need narratives because narratives help us to make sense of our world. And narrative is what helps us to develop a coherent sense of self. But what starts to happen is our

narratives can actually imprison us. I want to put my hand up for this career change, but I'm not creative, therefore, I'm not going to. Or I'm just not going to get the job, there's no point.

So we have stories that hook us. We also have emotions that hook us. For instance, when we say something like, you know, "I am stressed," what we are essentially doing is we are saying, "I am, all of me, 100% of me, is stressed." We are defining ourselves and imprisoning ourselves by the word stress. And what is the impact of that? The impact is that it doesn't allow space for other parts of ourselves, our values, our intentions, who we want to be in this situation, um, our dreams and our hopes.

And so the first part of emotional agility is I talk about how often we get hooked, which is, uh, getting stuck in thoughts, emotions or stories that basically don't serve us. They don't serve our values and who we want to be in the world. And then what I do is I go through four essential movements that are really critical and foundational to emotional agility. The first that I've alluded to already is what I call showing up. And showing up is this idea of opening yourself in a way that is more willing and compassionate and accepting of yourself and of your difficult experiences. And so what you do when you do this is you're moving away from what I found in my research is that often when people have difficult experiences, what they might do is they might bottle those experiences.

So they say things like, "Uh, I'm unhappy, but I shouldn't be unhappy. I'm just going to ignore it. I'm going to pretend it doesn't exist. I'm going to, you know, write in my gratitude journal," all that stuff. You know, gratitude, I'm- I'm- I'm not anti-gratitude (laughs) or anti-happiness.

WHITNEY (laughs)

SUSAN But what it can do is it can lead us to, basically, move into a space of rationalizing away our difficult experience and that's bottling.

Brooding, on the other hand, is when we get so stuck in the difficult experience that there's also no space for anything else. You know, "This is terrible. I feel awful. There's just no point. I get imprisoned by my cynicism and so on." So when we recognize that bottling and brooding are both, look very different, but actually are associated with lower levels of mental health, lower levels of well-being, poorer relationships, and more difficulty attaining goals.

And we start saying, "Well, what does emotional health look like?" Emotional health is about showing up to our emotions with acceptance and willingness and compassion. So that's showing up.

The second part is now, you know, you kind of recognize that emotions are data, they're a really important data. But we don't want to get stuck in our emotions. You know, they're data, but they're not directors. You know, because I feel guilty doesn't mean I am a bad parent. It just means that I feel guilty. So what we all need as humans beings is we need the capacity, not only to show up to our emotions in healthy ways, but also to not let our emotions drive us. You know, we own our emotions. We own our thoughts. We own our stories; they don't own us. So what are some of the strategies that I'm talking about? What do I mean here?

Well, there are a couple of things that are really practical. The first is, when people say things like, "I am stressed or I am sad." As I already mentioned, what you're doing is you're saying, "All of me, 100% of me. There's no space for anything else." But what is doing linguistically is it's basically defining you by your emotion. "I am sad." So a really important strategy to create space between you and your emotion is that you can bring other parts of yourself forward. You know, this beautiful Viktor Frankl phrase, this idea that between stimulus and response, there is a space.

And in that space, there's a power to choose and it's in that choice that lies our growth and freedom. When there's no space between stimulus and response. "I feel stressed, so I'm going to shut down," or "My husband's starting in on the finances, I'm going to leave the room." When we, instead, show up to our emotions but we recognize that we don't want our emotions to drive us, there are important skills that help that to happen. So instead of, "I am stressed," notice your thought, your emotion or your story for what it is. It's a thought. It's an emotion. It's a story. It's not a fact.

"I'm noticing the urge to leave the room. I'm noticing the thought that I'm not good enough. I'm noticing the feeling of being undermined in this meeting. I'm noticing the feeling of being stressed." Now it sounds like a linguistic trick and it is. But it's a really important research-based, powerful linguistic trick, which is what you're doing is you're noticing your thoughts and feelings for what they are. They're thoughts, they're feelings, they're not fact. They're not here to stay. They're not here forever. They're thoughts and feelings.

So what you're doing is you're creating space and what that allows you to do is to step out that other parts of you can come to the fore.

WHITNEY So pausing for just a second, I mean, in reading that, I did that experiment of, you know, instead of saying, "I am stressed," or "I'm overwhelmed," that seems to be one of my common things that I like to say and, or have liked to say in the past, um, is to, when I did that experiment and let me just see if I can get it right of what you said, is to say, "I- I'm noticing that I'm having the feeling of experiencing stress." When I did that, the emotional or the experience that I had in my body and in my being was very different than when I said, "I am stressed." And so-

SUSAN Yes.

WHITNEY ... I think anybody's who's listening to this, if you're like, "Oh, I don't know, it's just semantics." Like, no, seriously, try it. Try saying, "I am stressed," and then try saying, "I am noticing that I am experiencing the feeling of stress." It's very different. It's very different.

SUSAN It's so powerful. It's so powerful and this is, this is something that can be used. If you're sitting in a meeting and you're saying to yourself, "I'm being undermined."

"I'm being undermined." Okay? What we're doing is we are stating that as a fact to ourselves, "I'm being undermined," and you're ready to either shut down or to attack. If, instead, "I'm noticing the feeling that I'm being undermined," what you're doing is you're just starting to move into the space. It's- it's, you know, it's mindfulness, really. I mean, that's what it's doing.

WHITNEY Mm-hmm (affirmative).

SUSAN You know, it's sending forth the feeling, the emotion, for what it is. And what it does is it creates a level of space and centeredness and breathing and groundedness that's very powerful.

WHITNEY Yeah. It's so good. I love how you use the word stepping out, because usually, we think it and certainly in English, that brings with it a sort of sense of, "Oh, I'm going to step out or I'm going to go outside and I love how you've applied that to our emotions. I'm stepping out of this construct where I'm allowing the emotion to define me to a place where I am me and I'm ex- there's ex- I'm having this feeling of this emotion, but it does not define me and I love how you are that.

SUSAN It, that's exactly. Exactly. It's so powerful. It's so powerful. A second strategy, you know, if- if it's helpful, it's just, you know, y- the example that you use, "I am stressed." So a lot of people use black and white labels to describe how they're feeling and they grab onto these commonplace, uh,

pieces of language. You know, I'm stressed is the most common one. And one of the things I talk about in my TED talk is that, you know, I am stressed - for one person, that stress that might be I'm stressed because I feel a lack of support for something that's really important to me. For another person, stress might be, I don't have the skills to do what I'm trying to do. And for yet another person, stress might be, I'm in the wrong job. I'm in the wrong career.

So when we label all of our emotions as stress, what it doesn't do is it doesn't allow us to actually understand the causes of that emotion. And so what I've found in my work, what Lisa Feldman Barrett's found in her work is that when we instead stop using these very broad, brush stroke labels to describe how we're feeling and we start saying, "What are one or two other options of how I'm feeling? What is more granular that I can describe this? Oh, it's disappointment.

WHITNEY Hmm.

SUSAN Oh, it's something else." What that actually does is it helps you to understand the cause and what we know happens is it starts to activate what's called the readiness potential in our brains. It's the potential that says, "Oh, what I've got to do next is, you know, get my CV together. What I've got to do next is-

WHITNEY Oh.

SUSAN ... organize a meeting with my boss." So what it does is it starts moving from the space of, "I'm stressed and I feel incapacitated by the stress," into, "Ah, this is the cause and here's the pathway for it." Again, it's-

WHITNEY That's so interesting.

SUSAN ... so powerful and important.

WHITNEY Yeah, so it's almost like you, when you said that, it's like you, it's like you have this big block and when you say, "I'm having this experience of, you know, I'm noticing that I'm having this experience," and then you try to understand what's behind that experience. And you're sort of breaking it into smaller and smaller blocks, then what you're saying is then, there's a part of your brain that says, "Okay, these are small enough pieces now, I'm going to construct a solution," and so your subconscious can start figuring it out. That's fascinating.

SUSAN Yes. Yes. Yes. And I'll give you a quick example of something that's-

WHITNEY Yeah, please do. Yeah.

SUSAN ... is my son came home from school and he was really angry about something. Now on the face of it, we might just be, "Okay, you're angry." And when we started doing this thing of, you know, what is the emotion beneath the emotion? What are two other options here? What had actually turned out was that his anger was that it was really that he felt that something was unfair.

WHITNEY Hmm.

SUSAN So what does that open up as a parent? And I give this example as a parent, but of course, it applies in leadership or in other aspect of our lives, is you can then start s- having this conversation about, it seems a value of yours is fairness. And- and from a parenting perspective, what you're doing is you're now moving beyond just, "Oh, it'll be okay. Tomorrow it will be fine. I'll bake cupcakes with you," into-

WHITNEY (laughs)

SUSAN ... helping your child to develop a sense of who he is as a person, what his character is, what his values are. And it's the same example for all of us in different ways. Emotion granularity, again, is just this idea that you're not taking the first broad brush stroke emotion. Instead, what you're doing is you're saying, you know, what is *really* the emotion? If someone had to give me a list of 50 different emotions, what is the emotion that isn't the first one that comes to mind, but that's really happening here? And yes, what it does is it starts activating a whole sense of goal setting, forward movement and momentum.

WHITNEY So powerful and thinking about that from a coaching standpoint, when you're coaching someone, whether, you know, it's someone who works for you, like you said, it was for your son. For anybody that you might be coaching to be able to have that understanding and that vocabulary is incredibly powerful in helping people move from a place of being victim, a victim, to a person who, or being acted upon to being able to act all because they named what they were feeling.

SUSAN They named the emotion. They named the emotion. So that's the second part. So it's showing up stepping out, which is data, not directives.

WHITNEY Yep.

SUSAN The third part is walking your why and what I'm referencing here in walking your why is a lot of times when we think about managing emotions, people will say, you know, "Okay, if you feel treated unfairly at work, should you have it out with your boss or should you just be quiet?" You know, what is the right thing to do in a situation? And we can't define what the right thing is to do in any, any situation in the absence of our values. Like, who do we want to be in the world? And I'll give you an example of what this might look like again. If you feel like you've got to give someone feedback because it's in your job description or it's written in your KPI and this is what you've got to do, what does this mean for us as human beings?

We know that when people are told they have to do something, what I call a have-to goal, our immediate response is one of resistance. I don't want to do it. I resent doing that. I might do it but I'm not going to do it effectively. But if someone says, you know, "What's really going on for me is I value fairness and I'm worried about the feedback being fair." What you can start asking yourself is questions about what is giving fair feedback look like?

WHITNEY Mm.

SUSAN How fair is it if I don't give this feedback? How fair is it to myself? How fair to the person? How fair, you know, to the organization? What you're starting to do is you're starting to move away from this idea of, "What should I do? What must I do," in this situation into, "Who do I want to be?" You know, who-

WHITNEY Yeah.

SUSAN ... do I want to be here?" And so, walking your why is really this idea that our emotions, our experiences, whether that's in our relationships, or in our parenting or in the workplace, these point to our values.

WHITNEY Mm.

SUSAN And when we start bringing our values more front of mind and we start saying, "What is my choice point here? What is my why? Who do I want to be in this situation?" "Why am I, w- why am I

leading? What does leadership look like to me? Yes, I've got this startup business. Why do I want to do it? What does it represent in terms of my values, my autonomy, who I want to be in my flexibility?" Keeping that front of mind.

And then the last part of it is just what I call, um, moving on. And this is how do we actually on the ground establish values-based behaviors that are sustainable, that are consistent, that move us in a habitual way into being the person we most want to be?

WHITNEY You know what's interesting is going back to the, um, the walking our why for just a second. The thing that occurred to me as you were saying that is, is that we need to understand what our values are so that we can keep grounding ourselves in who we want to be. But then I thought, "You know, the flip side of that means that if we want to make change in the world, in our workplace, in our family, we just have to do something different."

SUSAN You know, this is really, it's incredibly important and it's- it's not just this idea that values are critical because, you know, everyone says they're critical. It's literally the idea that values become a grounding base of our actions.

So if I'm just being swept away by the tides and being, again, hooked into, "Ah, everyone else is doing A, B, C. I should be doing it as well," then it's very disconcerting for us. But if we're able to say, "You know, I, you know, I valued ..." I mean, here's an example. It's like, "I value being present and connected as a parent." Now what does that mean in my reality?

WHITNEY (laughs)

SUSAN In my reality, I have to ... not have to, I choose to, in my work, I travel a lot, okay? And what that sometimes does is it sets people where they say, "Oh, I've got a values conflict. On the one hand, I value my work and on the other hand, I value, uh, my home life and being a parent and my values are in conflict." What I would suggest is that actually, your values are not in conflict. Your values just *are*. You know, they, we are capacious and beautiful and big enough as human beings to have multiple values. You know, you can value your career and you can value your family. So what is in conflict? Okay, what is in conflict, most typically, is not your values. What's in conflict, most typically, are your goals; your goals, your specific goals. I have a goal to be speaking at this conference next week and I also have a goal to be at my child's piano recital.

WHITNEY (laughs)

SUSAN And because I'm not, you know, because I'm not omnipotent and omnipresent, I can't be in both at once. So what's beautiful about this, what's so liberating is you now are no longer thinking, "Are my values now in conflict?" No. My goals are in conflict.

And so what we can do is we can start saying, "Okay, are there things that I can do, given that I value traveling and I value my work and I value speaking at this conference and it's also helping to feed my family and do all of the other things that I value, you know, are there ways that I can Skype into my child's piano recital? Can I speak to him before? Can I speak to him afterwards?"

What you start to do is you start to move from this never-win situation into something that is really liberating, which says, "How can I recognize that I have both these values, that there's this conflict of goals at this moment and what are ways that I can live my values in a way that actually isn't an either/or, um, but that allows me to deliver on my values in this context, in the ways that we can do it?"

WHITNEY Was that an actual situation? Does that ha- [crosstalk 00:42:03].

SUSAN It was an actual situation-

WHITNEY (laughs)

SUSAN ... I think for all of us, you know, for all of us. It's, we make hard, we- we make hard decisions. And that's one of the things that I explore in my book, which is sometimes making the hard decisions of what is it that I'm going to do and what is it that I'm not going to do? That is defining of us as people and it's beautiful and wonderful to sometimes say, "Actually, I can't do that thing because it's not consistent with who I want to be or what's important to me right now." You know, our values basically provide a lens that allow us to make decisions. Otherwise, we are swept away by the tides and we turn around in 10 years' time and we go, "Oh, I'm driving the nice car, but I'm living someone else's life."

WHITNEY Mm-hmm (affirmative). Yeah. Interesting. So I, and I like that how you parsed out this idea of looking at it's not my values that are in conflict. It's my goals, which again, changes how we feel about that conversation. It feels very different. Very interesting.

SUSAN It's circumscribed, it becomes circumscribed. It becomes focused. It not all bound up in, "Oh my goodness, you know, I'm a bad parent and my-

WHITNEY Right.

SUSAN ... everything's in conflict and it doesn't work." It's like, they're these two specific things.

WHITNEY Yeah.

SUSAN You know, "Can I let go of one of them? Can I do away with one of them? Can I enact my values when doing both of them, like what can I actually do in this particular thing?"

WHITNEY Right. It's, yeah. It's that's potentiator again. All right, so as we start to wrap up, just a few final questions. You know, there's the book that we wrote and there's the book that we tell people wrote and then there's the book that people think we wrote. Your book was published in 2016. Any thoughts about the book that people, now think you wrote, some things that have maybe surprised you or ways that people are interpreting it or how they're using these ideas that were unexpected.

SUSAN Well, what I'm finding that people are using the book in ways that really traverse, you know, all contexts of life. So, I'm parenting differently, I'm relating differently, I'm coming to terms with my cancer diagnosis using these ideas. I'm leading differently. I think one of the things that I really wanted to be clear about in the book and I hope that has come through is that I'm not anti-happiness, um-

WHITNEY (laughs)

SUSAN ... you know, or anti-positivity. (laughs)

WHITNEY No, of course not.

SUSAN For goodness sakes, I mean, I actually-

WHITNEY (laughs)

SUSAN ... literally, literally, literally wrote a book called, *The Oxford Handbook of Happiness*, which is a 90-chapter end to end about what do we know about human happiness. What I think is fascinating is I think people's connection and recognition with this idea that when we just chase happiness that actually, we become more unhappy over time.

That happiness is not found in chasing happiness; happiness is found in living life in a way that feels values-connected and meaningful and compassionate and curious. So I think that's been something that's been gratifying to me.

One of the things that I found people have found most powerful is when- when I talk in the book about letting go. And in my talks as well, this idea, that so often as human beings, we become hooked on the idea of being right. You know, am I right? Am I being undermined? Am I being treated badly? Am I, you know, I am right and he is wrong. You know, someone might say, "I haven't spoken to my brother for five years and I can't remember what that person did, but I just know that I am right and he is wrong." And one of the things that I talk about in the book is we can get so focused on being right that we don't ask the more important question. And the more important question is, is my response serving me?

WHITNEY Hmm.

SUSAN Is my response bringing me closer to being the parent, the lover, the loved one, the partner, the leader, the person that I most want to be? And when we let go and sometimes it's a conscious decision to just let go of being right and instead, start to ask - "What can I do here, that's actually serving who I most want to be in the world?" That, I think, is just incredibly liberating for people and- and it's one of the ideas that people are most connecting with in this work.

WHITNEY Hmm. Hmm. Susan, where can people find you?

SUSAN So my quiz, I've got a wonderful [online quiz](#) that takes about five minutes to complete and people get a free, 10-page report from it and that can be found at susandavid.com/learn. That's an emotional agility quiz. My TED talk, *The Gift and Power of Emotional Courage* and, uh, in the book, *Emotional Agility*.

WHITNEY Excellent. So, last question f- ... Well, yeah, two more questions.

SUSAN (laughs)

WHITNEY So one, and then I promise, I'm finished. Uh-

SUSAN Loving it, I'm loving it.

WHITNEY As you think about this book and all of these ideas, what is something that you have learned recently where, you know, one of the beautiful things about writing on this topic about emotional agility is it requires you to walk your talk if you, if you're who you want to be, which I know you do. So what are some things or one thing that's happened recently that, because of all this work that you've done, you did something just a little bit differently because you were reminded of how you want to show up in the world?

SUSAN Well, one of the things I talk about in [my book](#) and [my TED talk](#) is, this idea that discomfort is the price of admission to a meaningful life.

WHITNEY Mm-hmm (affirmative).

SUSAN What do I mean by that? Um, you know, we don't get to have a meaningful career or raise a family or leave the world a better place without stress and discomfort, okay? So discomfort is the price of admission to a meaningful life. And one of the things that I'm working on just in terms of a new business endeavor is really moving me out of this idea of, you know, am I an entrepreneur? Am I not an ... You know, these stories that we get stuck in that really can be stories that take us to the path of comfort. You know, "I may as well not start that thing," or "I may as well not do that thing."

But that I actually disconnected with the impact that we want to make in the world. And so, for me, it's really been around that. It's been, it's been moving, you know, in- in a business endeavor that I've got where part of me is really scared of this.

WHITNEY (laughs)

SUSAN And then the other part is, but I know that if I don't move forward with it, that that comfort will actually become a cop-out-

WHITNEY Mm. Mm.

SUSAN ... in the end. And that- that if I keep pushing myself towards discomfort ... not discomfort for discomfort's sake, discomfort for value's sake, that that's the way that I get the most progress and growth in my life.

WHITNEY So what's the business endeavor?

SUSAN It's a startup. It's a startup that is focused on these skills but how they, in really granular ways, impact on culture. You know, I think about organizations and I think about how organizations talk about engagement and culture and most of my work is in organizations. But the fact is, is I've never met a leader who says, "I don't want to be inclusive." I've never met someone who says "I don't care about my team." So what is happening here? What is happening here is there's a complete disconnect between my values and how I can enact my values on a day-to-day basis. In other words, what we mean by culture, you know, the enaction of values-

WHITNEY Mm-hmm (affirmative).

SUSAN ... on a day-to-day basis. And so it's a tech company that's focused on, uh, culture engagement and values that are more co-created and earned and driven by the individual.

WHITNEY Well done and I love that. You move from comfort and you're not going to cop out. You're going to just be a little uncomfortable. And as you said, what did you say? Discomfort is the price-

SUSAN Of admission to a meaningful life.

WHITNEY ... [crosstalk 00:50:42] to a meaningful life. I love that. Any final thoughts, Susan?

SUSAN I love your work and I think that there's such synergy between what I've just described here around discomfort and-

WHITNEY (laughs)

SUSAN ... what so many of your-

WHITNEY That's interesting.

SUSAN ... you know it, so many of- of the listeners of this podcast are, you know, thinking about, which is, who do I want to be in the world? What can I let go of? How can I be flexible? How can I be agile? And for all of us, we all are work in progress and so with that all, comes a healthy dose of compassion and self-kindness, recognizing that as human beings, we're all doing the best we can with who we are and with what we've got and the resources that we've been given in life.

WHITNEY Susan David, thank you.

SUSAN Thank you.

Susan's work is extremely important in ordinary times. But at the time of this airing, we are at the end of March 2020, a few weeks after the NBA suspended its season and cities across the world are sheltering in place as we all try to slow the spread of a virus.

The ability to be emotionally agile in ordinary times is important, but in extraordinary times like these, we need every tool at our disposal to feel our feelings, understand our values and persevere.

I loved this quote - "emotional agility means having any number of troubling thoughts or emotions and still managing to act in a way that serves how you most want to live." No matter what may come our way, we have the ability to choose. That doesn't mean it's easy, but it's possible. As Susan also said, our feelings can be "messengers to teach us about ourselves and prompt insights into important life directions."

I think the most useful tool for me was the idea of taking "I am" phrases and getting a little bit curious and turning them into "I am feeling..." statements. Instead of thinking "I am stressed out" right now, I can instead think "I am noticing that I have stressful feelings." It's a subtle shift, as we said, but very helpful. Giving us the space we need to act instead of feeling acted upon. And when so many things are out of our direct control, that space is critical.

These are extraordinary times, and we will have hard days. The good news is that we can use these feelings, use these hard days as a tool to figure out what matters most to us. Providing fuel so we can continue to grow. Ultimately, our response to this situation - any hard situation - can serve us if we can use our curiosity to guide us toward what we value.

Practical Tip: This week, you'll probably have a hard day. You'll may start to feel intense emotions. When you do, instead of telling yourself, "I'm so stressed." "I'm so anxious." "I'm so sad." - try an experiment and think, "I'm noticing that I'm having stressful feelings." "I'm noticing that I'm sad." Give yourself that space.

Thank you again to Susan David for being our guest, thank you to sound engineer Melissa Rutty, manager / editor Macy Robison, content contributor Nancy Wilson, and art director Brandon Jameson.

I'm Whitney Johnson. And this is Disrupt Yourself.