

Disrupt Yourself Podcast

EPISODE 243: EMMA MCADAM

Welcome to the Disrupt Yourself Podcast, where we provide strategies and advice on how to climb the S-Curve of Learning in your professional and personal life, disrupting who you are now to slingshot into who you want to be. I'm your host, Whitney Johnson. We don't always think of the internet as a positive place for mental health. But if you know where to look, there are many professional creators online who specialize in well-being. One extremely popular expert is Emma McAdam, a licensed marriage and family therapist who is known for her YouTube channel, Therapy in a Nutshell. Her videos demystify things like anxiety, depression and emotional regulation while being highly practical. I am a big fan of Emma's work and was thrilled to talk to her and learn from her. I think you will be too. So, Emma, I am so excited to welcome you to the podcast I have downloaded bought several of your courses. I'm a huge fan. I have shared many of your videos with family and friends and clients and how I first found you. I'm not sure exactly, but somehow on YouTube, I came across your course on rewiring your anxious brain. And what I thought was so fascinating is that you said that when you're anxious, the thing that you think that you want to avoid is exactly the thing that you should do. So could you just talk to us at a very high level what you shared in that and then tell people how to go find that particular video?

Emma McAdam: Yeah, yeah. So your brain is basically trying to figure out how to sort through all of the stimuli that is coming in at all times, right? It's trying to figure out what's really important, what is important and then the deep part of your brain. Its role is to help you survive, to not die, basically. So when we feel a little anxious, it's an emotion. It's partly in our body. It's partly in our thoughts like we might worry something bad might happen. But so let's say we see something that makes us anxious. So it could be something like a phobia of a dog, like you're scared of a dog, or it could be something like, Oh, I have a big work assignment coming up. And either way, your brain is scanning the environment and it's going to see something like that as a threat. And it's going to trigger this little anxiety response. And you're going to think, Oh, no, I don't want to be around this. This is scary. And so if you at that point, avoid that dog, then you feel the sense of relief or if you avoid you procrastinate doing that work

assignment or you say, Oh, I'm just going to quit my job or I'm going to drop out of my college class because this is too scary.

Emma McAdam: Then your brain triggers the sense of relief, right? There was a threat. You escaped it and you survived. So your brain is like, Good job, you did it, you survived this threat and your brain is like, phew. The reason I survived this threat is because I escaped it, avoided it or distracted myself. And so I'm going to make my human do that again because one of my jobs is to make my humans survive. So then your brain is like, You know what? I'll do to make sure that my human avoids the next dog or avoids the next big challenge at school is I'm going to make them more anxious. And that's going to help them remember that dogs are actually dangerous and school is actually dangerous. So when we avoid something, it sends a message to our brain that our survival is dependent on avoiding that and your brain replies by increasing your anxiety.

Whitney Johnson: So good. Ok. Listen to this. Go watch the video. I think this is so valuable for every single person on this planet to understand what's going on because we do it. We think if I avoid that, I'll feel better if I cancel that meeting. If I cancel that lunch that I have anxiety about going to whatever it is that is going to just make it worse. And so the thing you think you can't do, you must do.

Emma McAdam: Mm hmm. Yep. So when we face a threat, when we actually gradually interact with safe dogs or we gradually build ourselves up to facing these challenges at school or work, then that tells how do we survive? Right? That's that's an important part of this process. But we survived the threat. Then our brain is like, Oh, that was actually safe. I'm actually capable. I can actually handle this. And then your brain decreases your anxiety levels over time.

Whitney Johnson: I was just talking to a colleague, actually, my daughter. But it could be a colleague as well I was having this conversation. She needed to reach out to a professor to ask them, the professor, if the professor would be her adviser. And so because she's a freshman in college and so she was high, you know, I don't want to do that. It's kind of uncomfortable for me to do it. And one of the things that I did is after she did it, after she had the conversation, I actually made a point because I've got Emma as the tutor in my ear to say to her, OK, so how did it go? Did it? Did it? You were successful, you survived. What did it feel like? And so would your advice to be as you're interacting with people around you is once they get through that thing that they thought they were going to die in to have them observe out loud? Oh, did you notice you didn't die? Like, what? What do you do?

Emma McAdam: Yes, absolutely. That's dead on. So you face something that made you feel anxious and afterwards you're like, Oh, I did that. That reinforces in your brain that that is safe. So basically, every little thing we do is like paving these neural pathways in our brain and making them a little bit thicker. So what we consistently use, those neural pathways become thicker, broader faster. So if we're consistently thinking thoughts like, Oh, I'm such a failure, then that neural pathway becomes like the highway in your brain and trying to think a thought like, Oh, you know what, I can do hard things feels like bushwhacking through the woods, you know, like, it's a much harder pathway, and the more you use a pathway, the thicker it becomes. So if you face something scary, like talking to an advisor and then you and you do that and you survive, then that's like running that neural pathway one time and it's like, OK, I can do that, and it's making that neural pathway thicker. But then if you remind yourself you remember it, it's like actually experiencing that again, and it's making that neural pathway thicker. And the same thing works with gratitude. If something good happens to you and you don't even notice it, it really doesn't impact your brain. If something good happens to you and you notice it, then it's like your brain is like, Oh, the world is OK, the world is safe or the world is good. And then if you practice intentional gratitude later, it's like re-experiencing those good things over again and making those neural pathways thicker, like literally wiring the brain differently.

Whitney Johnson: Hmm. Which is why it's so important at the end of the day to replay what worked, what went right?

Emma McAdam: That's right. Yep. And our brain has a natural default setting of survival, which means that it's going to be more likely to pay attention to the things that went wrong than the things that went right. Like our default is to notice that. And so if we want to choose not to be stuck in survival mode all the time, we have to choose to help our brain remember that a lot of good things are happening and that safety is something that is real.

Whitney Johnson: You just talked about gratitude. Can you just talk a little bit more? Maybe it's gratitude. Maybe it's something else that we can do to manage stress better.

Emma McAdam: One of the first things I would say is we use the term stress and anxiety interchangeably, but the definition of stress is actually that it's in your body. Worry are the thoughts that you have about, Oh, what about work or what about this email? And stress is the physical reaction that happens in your body where your nervous system kicks on that fight, flight freeze response and anxiety. I consider anxiety is kind of the combination of the two. And so when it comes to work stress, the first thing I would coach people on is to be aware of what's going on in your body when you're at work. Are you tense? Are you tight? Are you? Do your hands get cold and sweaty? I mean, what? What level of stress? Again, because there's actually a very nice level of stress like you stress or good stress helps you perform. It helps you get excited, helps you get motivated. And then if you take that a little further, there's like a little bit of like terror stress where you're a little bit scared or overwhelmed, and then you take that to the next level.

Emma McAdam: And that's where the shutdown happens. That's where you get exhausted, that's where you freeze up or get locked up or overwhelmed. And so when it comes to work stress, I would say, you know, notice those things. And then the second thing I would say is you can actually learn the skills to regulate your nervous system. In the present moment. So a lot of people know about the fight flight freeze response. I don't know how many people know that when you open your email. Sometimes that triggers the fight, flight freeze response, like the human brain, is so powerful it doesn't just respond to a tiger in the present moment, but it can imagine future dangers by reading words on a page that trigger that fight, flight freeze response. If you pay attention to your body, you can notice the fight, flight freeze response happening when you're at work, and then you can learn the skills to calm your body down. And this is, you know, learning to regulate your nervous system or nervous system, you know, self-regulation.

Whitney Johnson: This is fascinating because we talk a lot about email or answering texts as giving people these dopamine hits that we crave and we can get addicted to it. But I don't think we talk about the fact that getting an opening an email can also trigger the fight, flight or freeze response. And so that's really interesting and yet makes another case for only checking email at certain times a day. Something else that you've said and then I'd love to hear you talk a bit about regulation as you talk about the difference between regulation versus relaxation. And I think that that was really an aha for me. And I'll tell you the experience that I had of it, and then you can refine it, which is, yeah, I have many days more than I would like to admit where I think if I can just get through the rest of this day, then I can sit down and have a chocolate chip cookie and watch a Korean drama. Everything will be OK, right? And I think in relaxation, as you say, is good and important. But then I'm not regulating at all. I'm just trying to numb myself until I can get to the end of the day and do those relaxing kinds of things. And most of us, the work that we do, we want to find joy and satisfaction in the work. So talk about the difference between regulation and relaxation. And then how can we regulate so that during the course of the day, we can actually enjoy the work that we're doing?

Emma McAdam: Yeah. And I totally relate to your story because I definitely that's how I was kind of taught like, I have kind of an anxious family where when they're in go mode, they are just bustling around and busy and running around doing things. And that's how I was at work too. I'd go to work, especially the the difficult weekends at my work and stuff I had. I'd run around just being kind of tight and worked up and tense, and then afterwards I would kind of collapse and be exhausted or really stressed out. And I think there has been a lot of talk about relaxation. Relaxation is when you take a break from what you're doing and you do something else. So the idea with relaxation is you have to stop work to rest and recover. And the problem with that is that inherently pairs in your brain the idea that work is the cause of your stress. When the reality is, it's how we perceive work, that is what causes stress. So work is a neutral stimulus and our brain interprets it as threatening or dangerous. If our brain interprets it as threatening or dangerous, then that triggers the stress response, Victor Frankl says. Between stimulus and response, there is a space and in that space is our power. So how we interpret work, we need to check ourselves and see how do we interpret work if our brain perceives work as a threat? That's what triggers that stress response. And when we ignore that fact, when we ignore that there's an interpretation in there, we then create this label in our brain that stress and work are inseparably connected, that they're fused. And our only option is to leave work, avoid work, to de-stress, to calm our body down.

Whitney Johnson: Mic-drop everyone, I hope everyone is listening to what she just said. This is so important. Ok, keep going.

Emma McAdam: So if we want to change our habitual response, are our nervous systems learned response to work we have to do? We have the choice to do two things. And the first one is to acknowledge that in the present moment, I am safe. This email feels dangerous, but I'm actually safe for this job review feels dangerous, but I'm not going to starve to death. I am actually safe. That interpretation in the middle there is really key. And then the second thing is, you can learn when you know that you are actually safe or even in situations where you're not actually safe. You can learn to regulate your nervous system for optimal performance. And the guy who trained me on this, he trains E.R. doctors and military and CIA agents on how to regulate their nervous system, even in situations where they may be facing danger. Because one of the reasons these folks experience a lot of PTSD is because their nervous system is chronically in the fight, flight freeze response when they're at work. They might actually be in danger, but they're having a danger react or they might. They're not actually endangered 99 percent of the time, but they're perceiving danger 100 percent of the time because there's a one percent chance of danger, like like a police officer in I don't know how, I don't know what the percentage is or a military member serving in a war.

Emma McAdam: There are moments of danger and then long moments of non danger, but their body is in the danger response the whole time. And that's the same way work is. You have moments where maybe your job is on the line or you have moments where your survival is important, your your, your employment survival. I would hope that none of you are in jobs where people are actually threatening you. So what he trains and what he taught me to do, which has really been fundamental for the work I do, is you can train your body to switch out of the fight, flight freeze response and into the parasympathetic response. Not a lot of people have been trained on how to do this, but you can trigger your body to switch to its natural resolving response, and you can still stay productive or vigilant, as he would call it, even even when you're in that state. And I think a lot of people don't know that you can actually train your nervous system like a muscle to become more habitually dominated by the parasympathetic response, which is the rest. And I rest and digest the feed and breed response where your body heals and it calms down throughout the day. So this is this is self-regulation.

Whitney Johnson: Hmm. I love it. Ok, so I'm in a meeting. Mm hmm. And I'm getting ready to give a presentation. I'm feeling that thing of, Oh, if I could just have this be over. What's one or two things that anybody who is listening to this can do?

Emma McAdam: Mm hmm. Yep. And I can teach you a couple of these body based skills. The one caveat I have is that when it comes to emotions, we can never get ourselves in a position where we're forcing our emotions to change. So if we put if we're feeling anxiety and we we make this rule like, Oh my gosh, I'm not allowed to feel this, that will tend to make our anxiety worse. But if we're like, Oh, I'm acknowledging I'm feeling this in my body, I'm allowing it to be here and we'll see if we can coax it into this self-regulation, then these these skills can be really powerful. So just had to throw that caveat out there. But here's some really simple things, and you can do these without anyone else noticing you're doing them. But with the parasympathetic response, I mean, the first and easiest thing to do is to take some slow breaths, and sometimes it's good to take deep belly breaths so you could be sitting there in your chair and you can lean back, put your hands on your stomach or just kind of you could even stretch your your arms back behind you and just let the air go into your belly.

Emma McAdam: Breathe in slowly, breathe out slowly. And that reminds your nervous system that in this moment, you're actually safe because your brain communicates to your body what state your body should be in. But your body also communicates to your brain, what state you should be, and sometimes it's hard to calm our minds down. So one of the fastest ways to trigger calm is through the body. There's another one that I really like that tends to work fast for people, and this is the yawn. So there's a there's a nerve coming out of your brain. It's the tenth cranial nerve. It's called the vagus nerve, and it starts in your brainstem, which is really kind of right above the roof of your mouth. So if you make a big yawn or if you raise your soft palate by saying kind of the R sound or you can feel the palate, the soft part of the back of your mouth lift up, or you can just make a big fake yawn. I mean, I wouldn't do this right in front of everyone at a meeting, but you can lift your soft palate quietly. But when you yawn, you can almost feel that automatic relaxing response.

Whitney Johnson: I am feeling very relaxed right now. I have yawned several times since you started talking about that.

Emma McAdam: Mm hmm. And yawning is contagious for a reason. Our nervous system mirrors other people's nervous systems. Mm hmm. And so people start yawning. It'll trigger that parasympathetic response and others, our bodies, our brain is constantly monitoring the faces of other people to know whether they're safe or dangerous. So if other people start yawning, then it sends a message to your brain, Well, you're safe. This person's not doing anything. They're going to fall asleep.

Whitney Johnson: You know, though, you just made me think when the next time I start yawning and I'm talking to someone, I'll say to them, Hey, I just want you to know this does not mean I'm bored. It means I feel very safe and comfortable around you. And that is why I am yawning. Yeah, it's a compliment.

Emma McAdam: Mm hmm. Yeah. I'll go to the temple and I'll just start yawning and I'll be like, Whoa, I got not that I'm so bored. It's that I'm just so calm here.

Whitney Johnson: So, so relaxed. I love it. Now for for the self regulation, is there a specific you have this catalog on YouTube, which is amazing. Is there a specific video that you would recommend that people go to for one or two of these skills that we've just been talking about?

Emma McAdam: Yep, I have two videos that are titled Four Ways to Soothe Anxiety in your Nervous System. And then the other ones Four More Ways to Soothe Anxiety and your Nervous System.

Whitney Johnson: Both of them are a total of eight. Yeah. All right. So a couple of your quotes that I love are a judgmental attitude toward emotions, predicts depression. I'm going to say four of them. And then if there's any comment you want to make something that comes up, please do so. Emotions cannot hurt you, but not dealing with them can. This is me paraphrasing you. Stop scanning for depression, start scanning for hope and instead of feeling better, get better at feeling.

Emma McAdam: Yeah, I love that you pulled those quotes. I was like, Wow, like, you've done a very good job summarizing my main, my main sticks, the main things that I'm constantly talking about, this idea of getting better at feeling. I think I think people a lot of times have kind of a fixed mindset around mental health because there's been so much conversation about the biological factors or brain chemistry that contributes to depression and anxiety. And while those are real factors, there's a whole lot of room for growth within mental health and this idea of like I can learn the skills to get really good at feeling a whole spectrum of emotions is something that I wish more people knew about because there are so many skills. And I mean, that's my mission, right? That's what I do. I'm just like, Let me teach you. Let me give you 500 skills, and maybe only 20 of them will help you. And that's going to be a lot in your tool, right?

Whitney Johnson: Yeah. I mean, you know, if only there were a course that we took in college or in high school or kindergarten on emotional regulation. Wouldn't that be amazing?

Emma McAdam: Absolutely, absolutely. And that's like I would love to get my emotion processing course simplified, even more so that it was like a middle school class. I feel like seventh grade would be the year.

Whitney Johnson: Do it to it. I dare you. I dare you, Emma. Oh, that would be fantastic. That would be amazing. So Emma, I'm wondering as a you know, you're talking about this emotional regulation and I'm wondering, I'm thinking about COVID 19 and is this a place like you talked about, you know, essential workers and And E.R. physicians and firefighters, et cetera. This sense of being in danger all the time and therefore your cortisol is high. What are your thoughts on that? What are your observations?

Emma McAdam: Yeah. And I think there's some interesting things going on right now because like I said before, our brain is able to comprehend danger that's not in the present moment, but it creates a bodily response in the present moment. And that's awesome because our brain can plan ahead and think about alternate futures and imagine different scenarios, and that's what makes humans so different from other animals. But basically, what's

happened is we have been told we're in constant danger for the last couple of years, and so we're having a constant bodily danger response for a couple of years. And then the hard thing for so many people is that one of the best ways to soothe that danger response is with connection with hugs, with eye contact, with seeing facial movement, which you can't really see with a mask. But I mean, just to clarify, I am in support of safety measures and be keeping people safe, so it's important that we do those things. So, you know, it's very clear that anxiety levels have been on the rise. But at the same time, I worry a little bit about the headlines and And and how news works, and I think it's important as people. Try to work their way through pandemic and just life in the 21st century is understanding like which headline is going to get your brain activated is the headline.

Emma McAdam: There's more anxiety than ever. Or is the headline people are learning more about mental health skills? Like which one is your brain going to pick up on your brain is designed to scan for danger. So it's going to pick up on these headlines that say you're in danger, and the news knows they'll get more clicks on the headlines that are the loudest or scariest. So when I see headlines that say, Oh, people are more anxious than ever, I'm like, Wow, that is such a circular argument. You are creating the anxiety in part that is feeding the clicks, that is creating anxiety, that is feeding the clicks. And I think we, as consumers need to be really intentional about how we use, how we use media, social media and news media because we need to understand that the way our brain works is we are going to be more likely to click on the scary stories and believe the scary stories. But that's not necessarily true that the world is worse off than it ever has been. That's the main headline. Oh, there's so much more anxiety. There's so much more fear, there's so much more illness, there's so much more awfulness. And that's why people are taking advantage of your amygdala, basically the fear center of your brain. Mm hmm.

Whitney Johnson: Yeah, that's interesting. So one of the things I'm hearing you say is that when we're interacting, so for example, if we're having a conversation with someone as opposed to saying, Oh, things are really scary, oh, there's so much anxiety instead to say, you're doing a lot, there's a lot happening. You're trying to make a lot of progress in the world. You're trying to do a lot of good things. Do you want to make even more progress? Let's talk about how you can emotionally regulate so that when you do get a little bit derailed, you can get back on track as quickly as possible. People aren't going to click on that, but it still can be a narrative that we in an underground sort of way perpetuate. And so I. Any thoughts on that?

Emma McAdam: Yeah, yeah. I think I think if we want to be mentally healthy, we do need to choose to acknowledge. We need to choose to acknowledge that there are difficult things in the world or things that we want to change or actual threats in the world. And we need to face those head on honestly and work to either resolve or accept those. So, yeah, Covid's a thing. Let's work on that. Let's choose practical steps that help, and we need to bring to mind constantly what's in, what's going OK, what's going good? What are the the positive things that are happening and what's our realm of control? What can we act on instead of leaving these threats like COVID? Just kind of this fuzzy, vague thing in the back of our mind that's constantly, quietly triggering our adrenaline glands and just letting it kind of run at a low level. We face it head-on. We say, OK, what is this? What is my choice about this? What actions will I choose and what will I accept? And then I'll move on to what else I'm going to do with my life.

Whitney Johnson: Yesterday, I just interviewed General Stanley McChrystal for the podcast, and we were talking about risk. And he said, You know, you can't. You can't avoid risk. You can't dodge risk. You need to be prepared for risk. And what I hear you saying is you can't dodge COVID. COVID is there, but you can be prepared. And going back to the Victor Frankl quote that you just brought up is you can be prepared to what am I going to do in this situation? What am I going to pay attention to? I'm going to pay attention. Am I going to scan for things that are going to depress me that are going to scare me? Or am I going to scan for that, which will give me hope and optimism and And? And one of the things I think about and we're kind of getting in this metaphysical conversation is, yes, there are challenging things in the world. But if you really believe there is an equal and opposite reaction that there is opposition in all things, that means there's scary things. But there are just that means there is a match for that. So for whatever is bad, there is an equal portion of good. And that to me is where you're trying to get our brains to go as we're having this conversation.

Emma McAdam: Absolutely, absolutely. And the the difference is the negative will come in as a reaction. We will see the bad as a natural reaction. We don't need to try hard, but our brains default mode is not to see the good. That's something we have to be intentional about. So the reactive brain reacts to threats and the intentional brain looks for gratitude, and the intentional brain looks for connection and the intentional brain double acknowledges

the good things you did. You think about it once you tell someone about it, you write it down and that reinforces your ability to perceive that. And when this comes to neuroplasticity or rewiring the brain, people talk about time being your most important asset, and I really believe focus is your most important asset. What you focus on, you get more of, and that's how your brain works. If, yeah, if you if you focus on something even trying to make it go away, trying to make your anxiety. You go away that tells your brain anxiety is really important, and it's going to make more of that. If you have a dark thought that you don't think you should have and you freak out about it and you tell your brain, this is awful, this is the most horrible thing your brain is going back. Whoa, that's really important. We should make more of that. And if and if you have the intentional practice of acknowledging the good in the world, your brain's going like, this is really important.

Emma McAdam: I'm going to make more of that. Hmm. And it's going to make more physical structures in your brain to acknowledge the good in the world. Hmm. So, Gary. So let me throw one more thing out. There's a book by Steven Pinker, which was on Bill Gates list, and it's called Enlightenment Now, and it's basically says the world is not worse than it's ever been. The world is not. And here's why. Here's all these incredible advancements we've seen. And really, I mean, people, there are real challenges that need to be faced, but there's less slavery than ever in the history of the world. Women have more power than ever in the history of the world. More people have access to health care than ever in the history of the world. More people can read than ever in the history of the world. More people have access to information than ever in the history of the world. More people, less people are starving than ever in the history of the world. And so there are. I'm not trying to say no one starving. Of course, there are things there challenges that need to be faced, but those are the headlines that no one clicks on. So the news channels don't publish them. So our brain gets taught that the world is a terrible, threatening, dangerous place, and we all need to be scared and anxious about it when actually our kids are safer than they've ever been.

Whitney Johnson: That's beautiful. Let's talk about primary versus secondary emotions, I want to just talk at a high level, as you said, secondary emotions are an emotion about an emotion and primary emotions are emotions about an event. So you talk about anger and shame, both being masks. So when we're feeling anger or shame, what are we masking?

Emma McAdam: Yes, we usually like about 98 percent of the time. Anger is about fear or hurt. Right? So if I'm angry, it's because I'm I'm, I'm scared of something or I'm hurt by something. And anger is a much safer emotion to feel than hurt, especially for a young boy who's been taught. You can't cry, right? A little boy's been taught. You can't cry. Then what do you do when you're sad? Oh, you get angry about it. Yep. And shame is another way to to mask deeper feelings of of fear or guilt. And I really, you know, this all ties into my belief that emotions serve a function. There aren't negative emotions that aren't positive emotions. There are emotions and they have something to teach us. But some emotions really aren't necessarily the truest version of that emotion. So if someone's really, let's say, let's say a father's really mad at their child because their child messed up the fear or the anger isn't super functional, it's not really going to help their child stop messing up. But deep underneath that is maybe a little fear the father might have that, you know, maybe they didn't do a good job parenting. And so they're trying to control the situation. And so if they went to that fear, they're like, Oh, I'm worried. Actually, I'm scared that I'm not doing a good job parenting, then that might motivate a little bit more helpful action like, Oh, I'm going to go take a class on parenting with love and logic, or I'm going to build a better relationship with my child. And that might be a little bit more helpful action, whereas anger, the action it motivates is like screaming, yelling, being violent. Not super helpful.

Whitney Johnson: Yeah. And the other thing I thought of when when I was listening to you is this idea of shame where, you know, if I'm feeling shame, which I've never felt before.

Emma McAdam: Me neither ever, ever, ever is.

Whitney Johnson: When I'm feeling that is to stop and say, OK, so there is something else going on. What is actually going on, like you're saying is, is it because I'm scared? Is it because I, you know, there's something else that I'm feeling? And to your point, when you can get to the the primary emotion, then there's an action that you can actually take around that. So your encouragement would be if you're feeling angry, if you're feeling shame. Ask yourself what's really going on. Stay with it and then you can move through it. So for people who are listening right now and thinking, I really need help, are there one or two videos you would suggest they watch and how would they go about finding a mental health professional?

Emma McAdam: Yeah, let me start with the second question, because that's easier. So one of the best resources to find a mental health professional in your area is Psychology Today's therapist finder, and you can get in there type in your zip code and find therapists in your area. And then it's got a little bar on the side where you can kind of filter out by what their therapeutic approach is, what they specialize in, what insurance they take, and you can see their pictures and get to know them a little bit before you kind of choose who you're going to call. So that's one of my favorite tools for helping people find a therapist in their area.

Whitney Johnson: One of the things that I really have appreciated about your work and your videos is that when I come across some people, I know, you know, they won't necessarily go to therapy therapists because they feel like they have to perform for the therapist. It's uncomfortable, and being able to watch your videos is very helpful because it feels safe. Ok, I can do this, I can watch this, I can learn from this and getting people maybe to the point where they are comfortable going to see a therapist. So I am grateful for that service that you provide. Ok, I gave you just a moment. So now what videos do you want to suggest people watch?

Emma McAdam: I mean, it's such a broad. It's such a broad question like, where do you start? And I can think of

Whitney Johnson: Maybe start with the first video is that?

Emma McAdam: My very first video is a great one. It's about anxiety. It's on the fight, flight freeze response. I made that four years ago, I would start. I mean, the emotion processing course is my comprehensive approach to like, let's start step by step figuring out what to do with emotions. And that's, in my opinion, a good place to start. There's a whole series there. And then another one is this one is what your depression diagnosis really means. And the the idea behind this is when when you feel depressed, you feel like it's who you are. You feel like you're broken. You feel like you are defective and it's permanent. And that is a specific symptom of depression to believe that about yourself. And in my opinion, while there are biological from my frame. There are biological causes contributing factors to depression, but that's only one of the causes. And. There's so much that can be done about depression, I've seen so many people experience so much growth that I would not personally consider depression to be a permanent condition.

Whitney Johnson: So in our work, we use the S-Curve of learning as this visual model to help people think about what growth looks like. So whenever you start something new, you're at the launch point in your grasping for knowledge to to figure out how you're going to move up that S-Curve and you're feeling excited and you feel afraid, and then you get into the sweet spot because you've done all this work and you're increasingly getting your predictions right. So you're getting more and more dopamine and then you get to the mastery and you know exactly what you're doing, but you're now a little bit bored. And so I would love for you just for a minute just to riff on this. What any thoughts? How does this intersect with your work? And I know this is completely putting you on the spot, but I'm very curious as to what your response is.

Emma McAdam: Yeah, I've been thinking about this quite a bit and thinking about how this applies. And if I were to combine your S-Curve with kind of my frame on this, it would be that there's kind of two curves and the initial point of learning with mental health. I think when people don't know very much, maybe they think, Oh, just get over it, just think positive, just pray and it'll go away. And that's this place of very low learning. And then they have this initial kind of burst of like burst of learning where maybe their doctor diagnoses them and they're like, Oh, I have a depression diagnosis, or they do some Googling and they're like, Oh, anxiety is genetic or depression is caused by brain chemistry. And so they they kind of move very quickly from this place of like, I don't know anything to this place. Well, now I have it all figured out. This is just a permanent condition that I have, and there's nothing I can do about it or just taking medication. I feel like that's some of the pop psychology approach. Or just distract yourself, you know, or even pity, like, poor me. There's nothing I can do about it, and I would say that it would be kind of like this initial point where they jump straight from not knowing too much to like this very quick like, well, nothing I can do about it like that, almost like a false version of that boredom spot.

Whitney Johnson: Interesting.

Emma McAdam: And then I would say there's a second curve after that where if people push through that and they keep learning, they'll feel this dip or they go back to like, whoa! Depression is actually quite a bit more complicated than a simple brain chemistry issue. Brain chemistry is one aspect of about 20 things, and there is no single cause for depression. It's actually this complex combination of all these different factors. So then people get to this place of like, Whoa, what do I really know? And that's where they're kind of in this like grasping for knowledge stage. And I would hope people get to that point. And then they start reading good books and they start. I mean, I try to make good content on my YouTube channel that teaches people skills. And at that point they start to feel some excitement and they're like, Whoa, I can learn to call my nervous system or whoa, I can have a growth mindset about my mental health. Oh my goodness, look at this skill. I made this very simple video about the locus of control, and you just draw two circles and they overlap a little bit. And it's like, what's in my control, what's out of my control and what's in my influence? And I thought this was like such a basic concept, and I had so many comments that people were like, Whoa, this is so helpful. And I was like, OK. So that's like where people are learning these skills that they were just never taught. And so that's what I would hope is that the sweet spot is where people get really excited about this growth mindset with mental health. And then at some point, maybe they feel a wave of depression or anxiety come back. Maybe they feel this high and this discouragement place, and they need to get back to learning something new or just re-implementing going back to that sweet spot of implementing the skills that they've learned.

Whitney Johnson: Oh, I love that. So you're saying, Oh, mental health, there's all this that I can learn. We've got all these resources available to us. You've got your YouTube channel and there's potentially a real challenge because when someone's in this place of opening up, ready to learn to to understand themselves, better understand how to navigate their emotions better, they are in sort of a vulnerable place. What advice do you have for as people are navigating besides listening to your YouTube videos? How do they how do they get to the point where they can figure out what should I be listening to And and how do I know when something might be actually dangerous for me?

Emma McAdam: This is a good question, and I have a couple of thoughts on that because I've I also think this applies to therapists in general. And when you choose a therapist because I've heard some people say, Oh, I tried therapy, it didn't help and I'm done. And so I'm just going to back up just a little bit. I recorded this series, which I haven't published yet, because it's like 100 hundred hours of recordings that I have to sift through. But it's where I interviewed 10 therapists who I respect and trust, and I asked them 10 questions each and I got a hundred different answers. So each question I asked I would get a I would. Ask them, for example, what's your favorite resource on depression? And I got 10 completely different answers and I asked all 10 therapists. Do you think depression is curable? And I got 10 different answers from 10 different therapists. And so I think the amount of difference in perspective and approach really matters. And that being said, these 10 therapists who I interviewed, I consider them all top notch and I will try to be gentle. But in the therapy field, there are some therapists who I don't consider to be as helpful. And then there's just straight up bad information, and I can think of a specific YouTube channel that publishes these very pop psychology videos.

Emma McAdam: And they're animated and they're cute. But they basically tell people like, Oh, you're broken because of your parents or your brain chemistry, and there's nothing you can do about it. So with all of this information out there, how do you select information? That's good. And even when people look really reputable and I would say a couple of things, and this is from my perspective, right, I'm biased on this. My perspective is you look for someone who has a growth mindset that is my one of my fundamental stances. If you're working with a therapist or you're reading a channel or you're watching, you're reading an article and it tells you there's nothing you can do about it. I would say that might be comforting, but it's maybe not super helpful. Now there is I and I say this because some people, my approach might really be like, not great. For some people, some people just really need to be validated because they're blaming themselves so much that they just need to be told it's not your fault, it's OK. Just be just be gentle with yourself for a while. And I do think that's one of the stages. So this is complicated. I would not. So, so this is like the very complicated version of my answer. I would not just trust someone because of a degree, but I think someone with a degree and someone who references research is going to be more reliable than someone who's very popular and very trendy, necessarily.

Emma McAdam: So you check their sources, for example, Dr. Tracy Marks on YouTube. She's a psychiatrist and she's excellent, and you look in her description on her videos and she's got six or eight references to peer, peer

reviewed controlled studies on what she's explaining. So look for someone like her over over someone who's just like, Hey, I'm interested in this stuff, or I make cool videos. So look for someone who uses research. Look for someone who uses science. Look for someone, in my opinion, who helps you grow. Who helps you feel hope and growth. And then when you're looking for a therapist, look for someone who you feel safe and comfortable with. But then also, I would say, look for someone who challenges you so you might find a therapist who is so comforting to go to and they just soothe you every time and you leave the session and you have nothing to change or nothing to grow on like. Sometimes my clients feel awful after session because I'm like, You know what? This this you kind of did this to yourself, and here's how you can change it if you want to, and it doesn't feel good. So I would look for a therapist who challenges you.

Whitney Johnson: Yeah, yeah. So so the two thoughts that I had is look for the evidence in your own life. Are you over time with this person? Do you like you said, do I feel safe around this person, number one? Number two, do I over time feel like I'm becoming better? Do I feel this sense of expansion of self? And do they love me enough to hold me accountable because they believe that I can be better than I am today? And so for me, you know, not being a therapist but having had therapy, that those would be some of the things that I would be looking for as evidence, not not quantitative, but qualitative evidence that in fact, it does make sense. And even you can have that experience in watching a video, right? Does this person ask me to act and not be acted upon? Is this person ask me to take responsibility for my life? Does this person also help me be compassionate toward myself? So I'm threading those two, threading those two places? You cut your teeth professionally by working in a wilderness therapy camp treatment. What is it?

Emma McAdam: Yeah, wilderness therapy program treatment. Ok.

Whitney Johnson: Ok. And so for teenage girls and so for those who are listening, who are either teenagers or work with teenagers, any quick advice?

Emma McAdam: First off, I love teenagers. I worked at them for 15 years or more. And oh, teenagers. They love to be treated with respect. So if you talk to them like a peer and you listen to them, they'll be more likely to feel like you value them instead of talking to them like they're a child who needs a lot of advice. So I think as parents, it's hard to shift that role from younger kids where they need to kind of be a little bit told what to do to older kids who when you honor their agency, when you really respect their ability to choose and you highlight to them consequences like, Oh, if you treat me like this, then our relationship suffers and I want a good relationship with you. But if you treat me like this, then I'll have more trust for you. And that's what I want. And you don't say you need to do this or I won't trust you. You just kind of highlight for them. Like, here's the outcomes of what you do. Let me help your prefrontal cortex develop a little bit as the part of your brain that plans ahead and doesn't develop until you're twenty five. So helping highlight choices for them is better than telling them what to do. And that shows them you respect them and honor them and value their their agency. So good.

Whitney Johnson: All right, so you made a video about how when we try to feel happy, it often backfires and that we need to parse the differences between purpose and happiness. Can you tell us where we can find the video and just at a high level? Talk a little bit more about that because it's intriguing.

Emma McAdam: Mm hmm. Yep. So that video is part of my emotion processing series, and it's I think if you search that and search purpose vs. happiness, you'll find it. And it says why trying to feel happy backfires. And I really believe we can foster happiness. I'm not saying like, Oh, we just have to be miserable forever. I'm saying that a lot of these kids I worked with in wilderness treatment, they they were there and they said I would ask them, What's your life goal? What do you want out of life? And all of them would say, Oh, I just want to be happy, which didn't mean be happy. It means I want to feel good right now. And so the way they had sought that happiness was avoiding things that are hard, like school, doing things that felt good, like drugs and sex and reacting to their emotions as much as possible. And in the long run, it didn't lead to happiness. So so we can feed happiness, and I see it like a seed. And if you take a little seed, like a little corn seed, and if you gradually feed it and you make your life good and you remember you focus on what the end goal of your life is. So I use a lot of acceptance and commitment therapy in my work, and one of the main tenets of this is values clarification. You ask yourself, What do I want my life to be about? What kind of person do I want to be when my time comes to transition out of this life and into the

next or to die? What do I want people to know that my life was about? And when you focus on that end goal, you can really create a fulfilling long term life that includes feeling lots of things.

Emma McAdam: So, for example, if all you want to do is feel good, you probably aren't going to be in a long term relationship because marriage is really hard, right? But if you want to have a meaningful life where you create fulfilling relationships, that includes accepting that meaningful relationships involve like suffering even hurt. And I don't mean like an abusive relationship, that's not what I'm referring to. I mean, like, like you can like, leave that. Ok, yes, that's OK. But like, I mean, like, real relationships involve working through really difficult things. And so if you have the mindset of like, Oh, I just need to feel good all the time, you're not going to be able to feed those long term sources of contentment and joy that come from your purpose and your values. And so it's like a seed. If you took a piece of corn and you're like, I need to feel happy right now. I need to feel good right now or I need this corn to grow right now, you might try breaking it apart, or you might try pulling on it or forcing it or pressing it, and that's just going to kind of crush the seed. But if you take that piece of corn and you water it and you plant it and you grow it, you actually can foster a happy life. You can foster a corn cob that grows into this, you know, hundreds of new little pieces of corn, but the same thing goes with emotions. If you try to force emotions, you try to force yourself not to feel anxious. You'll probably feel more anxious. You try to force yourself to feel good. You'll probably undermine your long term chances for happiness and joy.

Whitney Johnson: You've mentioned a lot of different courses and videos that people can go to if people want to do something today coming off of this and they're like, OK, emotions, emotional regulation, I want to go to this Academy of Emotional Regulation. Where's a good place for them to start?

Emma McAdam: I would recommend that maybe they start with the emotion processing course. So if you search therapy in a nutshell, how to process emotions and then the introduction video there's 30 videos they aren't all published yet. You just start with the introduction, and you could work through the first couple videos would be a good place to start, in my opinion.

Whitney Johnson: And I am making an endorsement of them. They are terrific, so I highly endorse them all. As we wrap up, am I what I would love to hear from you is what was useful for you in this conversation. So it may be something that you said, it may be something I said. It may be something that you heard that wasn't being said. What was useful for you?

Emma McAdam: Well, I really like this idea of the S curve. It's an interesting approach to getting yourself in the sweet spot of growth. And I, for me, growth. Is one of my number one values, just like how can we create a forward movement and get ourselves into this place where we're excited and learning stuff and still like kind of functioning in life? Pretty well, too? That's that's something that's been helpful for me to kind of process.

Whitney Johnson: This was an absolute delight. Thank you so much for talking us through this, and I wanted to just give you a quick compliment and an encouragement. You talked about making this course available to people who are in seventh and eighth grade, you know, 12 and 13 year olds. And I would really encourage you to do that because one of the one of I think your superpowers and your gifts is this ability to take ideas and concepts that, you know, I've read about them and lots of different places and studied this. But you have and I think this perhaps is because of the work that you did with teenage girls, the wilderness therapy, the treatment centers. You've learned how to talk about these ideas in a way that is very digestible, very understandable. And so I would encourage you to do that course because I think it will make a big difference for a lot of young women, but probably young men and their parents and everybody else who loves them. So that would be my encouragement to you. Thank you so much for being with us.

Emma McAdam: Oh, thank you so much for having me. It's been an honor.

Three key takeaways from my conversation with my number one avoidance leads to the anxiety loop. Emma explained that when our brains sense a threat, it's natural to want to run. This is fantastic when there's a wolf chasing you in the forest, but not so great when we're avoiding that big work assignment. Emma says that we literally thicken the neural pathways in our brains when we repeat actions or even think about them. Procrastination

feels good, which tells our brain to avoid it again, which leads to more anxiety about that work project. The good news is we can do some rewiring, and sometimes it's as simple as remembering when things go right. Remind yourself how great it feels to accomplish something and get that positive loop going, and Ms. Ward's focus is your most important asset.

Number two. Acknowledge the good in the world. The world seems like a scary place, especially in recent years. And yes, there are problems in the world and our personal lives that need to be addressed. But as Emma explained, our brains detect threats automatically. Negativity can be the default mode. We have to be intentional to see the good things. We are safe. The world is arguably the best it's ever been. That next email won't kill us. Taking a moment to acknowledge good things is a great tactic.

Number three Purpose vs. happiness. We often view happiness as an immediate feeling. Why am I not happy right now? What can I fix? But AM compares it more to a seed that must be nurtured with purpose. If we just avoid things that give us bad feelings and grasp for things that give us immediate pleasure? Well, we all know that's not a recipe for long term happiness. It's logical when you think about it, but framing it this way gives us better tools to acknowledge feelings. We don't like.

I'd love to hear about your strategies for mindfulness and mental health. Email me at W.J. at Whitney Johnson I read and respond to every note. In the meantime, if you want to do more listening, check out Jennifer Moss, author of The Burnout Epidemic episode 238. Ben Shiri, a restaurateur in Australia, on what he learned about mental health in episode 185, and Carol Kaufman, head of the Institute of Coaching at Harvard Medical School, Episode 118. And if you're ready to get smarter about your growth and we talked a lot about growth in this episode, our new book, Smart Growth How to Grow Your People to Grow Your Company is now available for preorder wherever books are sold. We'll include a link in the show notes. Thank you again to Emma McAdam for being our guest. Thank you for listening. Thank you to our producer. Matt Silverman, audio engineer and Editor, Whitney Jobe assistant producer Steve Ludwig, And production assistant Maddie McDaniel.

I'm Whitney Johnson.

And this is Disrupt Yourself.