

Disrupt Yourself Podcast

EPISODE 277: EMMA SEPPÄLÄ

Welcome back 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. Stepping back from who you are to slingshot into who you want to be. I'm Whitney Johnson. This week, we're covering a slippery topic, happiness. What is it really? And what's the difference between biting into a bar of chocolate, which makes me very happy and a much more sustained well-being? Contentment that often feels elusive. Fortunately, we have a Ph.D. psychologist on the show who has studied happiness for much of her career, Emma Seppälä. She's a best-selling author who also teaches business leaders at the Yale School of Management. Turns out achieving career success and wealth doesn't lead to that contentment. If you're searching for mental well-being, Emma says, start with your body, specifically with your breathing. I absolutely love the insights from this conversation. And if you stick around after the interview, you can practice Emma's breathing technique, which immediately calmed and focus my mind when we did it together. Enjoy.

Whitney Johnson: So, Emma, tell us about a formative moment in your life.

Emma Seppälä: Well, it'll be a bit more than a moment, but I grew up in France. You know, it's a place where you, you have everything. I mean, you work thirty-hour workweeks, you have free health care and education is awesome. And the food, everything. It's just beautiful to walk around. And yet growing up there, it felt like life is dark. You know, people bond by complaining. It was just a lot of negativity that I experienced. And I thought, okay, I guess this is what life is like. And then I moved to the U.S. for college at 17, and then I realized, oh, people don't do things this way here. No one has time for complaints. And I kind of like that. But after a while, I saw that in the U.S., people associate their worth with their productivity and were working themselves into the ground. And there was a suffering that I saw there. After college, I lived in China for a couple of years in Shanghai, where life was really rough back then. It was late nineties and no heat, there's no heat allowed in southern China in the winter, for example. So, people are living in these sort of very crowded apartments with like windows with holes in them and no heat. And it's rough. Life is tough. And there was so much smiling and so much joy from the gratitude because they had come so far from where they were 20 years before that. I really realized, what is happiness? Where does happiness actually come from? It has very little to do with our environment because you can see people in the U.S., a very wealthy, very successful and still unhappy. And you can see someone in a different environment with nothing but with a

wealth of joy in their heart. That set me on a lifelong quest to find out, you know, what makes human beings happy and what makes a life that's truly worth living.

Whitney Johnson: Let's fast forward a little bit and talk about a crucible experience.

Emma Seppälä: So, when I returned from China after a couple of years, I moved to New York City and I'd lived there for two days, and I was on my rooftop having my cereal. You know, on a, you know, high-rise rooftop in New York City. So exciting. And that's when a neighbor ran up and said, one of the Twin Towers, just a plane just crashed into it. And then we went and looked, and we saw the second plane hit. After that, every single morning I would start shaking around 8:30 AM. I had so much of anxiety. It was very physical, physiological, very difficult to control. So, that sent me on another sort of quest, like, how do we? What do we do in order to be most resilient in this chaotic life that we have? And so, that also set me then on to the direction of doing my doctorate in psychology and really looking at how do we build psychological resilience and well-being? Which is very interesting because having then done a number of years of research on this, now comes a pandemic. And it's like everybody is asking, how do we nurture psychological resilience? I mean, whether, you know, everybody's asking at schools are asking it, corporations are asking it. Everybody is waking up to the fact that we are not equipped to handle our emotions or well-being. And it's very interesting to me because no matter how successful you are, how much education you have, how skilled and trained you are, you probably have never learned how to handle your emotions in a formal way. You know, maybe nowadays we're starting to do that with our kids, but none of the generations prior. And chances are our parents didn't know either. Right. So, a very interesting experience that also really impacted sort of what I what I've ended up doing.

Whitney Johnson: So, what do you tell people, Emma?

Emma Seppälä: During that time in New York, I tried a lot of different things. I tried meditation. I was going to those hot yoga classes like four times a week. You know, my skin was glowing, but I was still anxious. I was doing a lot of different trends, a lot of different things. And then what I finally hit on that helped me was breathing, using breathing to the only way I can describe it is that it sort of recalibrates your nervous system. I learned a technique called it's called SKY Breath Meditation, and it really all of a sudden, I was able to function again normally. And so, that helped me a lot. Now, fast forward ten years later, I was doing my post-doc at the University of Wisconsin, working with veterans with Trauma. And that's when, you know, we were seeing, you know, many of these veterans with trauma have no they're not being helped by pharmaceuticals. They're not being helped by therapy in many cases. Not in all cases. In many cases. What do we do? And I thought back on that experience with breathing. And so, we started to we ran a randomized controlled trial looking at breathing for, for these veterans for whom other things hadn't worked. It was probably the most meaningful study that we've ever run because some of the veterans, you know, some of the words they said were, thanks for giving me my life back, you know? So, that also has led to a lot of interest in looking at how we can self-regulate with something so simple, you know, that we probably haven't thought about because no one's going to make a lot of dollars with us consuming, learning how to use our breath.

Whitney Johnson: You talked about happiness, and you said, "happiness leads to accomplishment, it's not the other way around." So, can you tell us a story? Tell us what you mean by that. And then also something that illustrates it.

Emma Seppälä: The idea for this book came from witnessing so many very successful people in Silicon Valley, at Stanford University, at Yale University falling for this myth. That in order to be at their most productive, they need to sacrifice themselves and their well-being and their happiness in pursuit of this other happiness, which will be their success. But it's very interesting because once they reach that pinnacle, whatever it is that they've placed as a goal for themselves, they don't seem to be satisfied. They keep going. Right. Again, nothing wrong with having ambition and goals, but when you look at the research, you know, being constantly in that state of heightened chronic stress and over overdrive, you know, adrenaline fatigue, you actually start to deplete all of the systems that you want to have most sharp in order to be successful. If that makes sense. So, we know that, for example, if you're stressed for a few minutes, yes, it's going to really sharpen your attention, your memory, blood's going to rush to your muscles. You're going to be in top form to save your own life. But as a stress researcher at Stanford, one of my colleagues there, Bob Sapolsky, has said, "you're only supposed to feel stressed 5 minutes in your life right before you die." Bob is the author of a book called, *Why Zebras Don't Get Ulcers*. He spent most of his career studying the stress response. But in any case, as humans, when we're chronically activating that stress response, we're also depleting our cognitive

facilities. And I think we've all seen that on days we're really stressed or burned out. It's not a great day to learn something new, to come up with some innovative idea. It's just not, right. But we also burn out our immune system, which, although in the last two years, especially, we don't want to be doing, and also just our general energy fatigue.

Emma Seppälä: And I think there's so much burnout. There was so much burnout pre-pandemic. It's only increased. There was so much disengagement pre-pandemic. So, people are rethinking how they're living their lives now. So, what I always would like to invite people to do is question, question the theory that tells you that in order to be successful, you have to pay the price of yourself, because it's false. You know, Whitney, how you can go from one country to another or even just one culture to another, one state to another. And there's a whole new way of doing things, way of being. And whenever that happens, you realize, oh, geez, like the way that I've always been doing things isn't necessarily the one and only true way. And so, in the happiness track, I talk about all the different ways in which we sort of theorize we'll be more successful. But we do so, we're actually wrong. For example, this idea of innovation, right. Across countries and across industries, CEOs all agree on what is the top thing they look for in incoming employees. You know, beyond integrity and honesty and hard work and all the other things is creativity. Of course, if you don't innovate, that's it. You can't be successful. So, innovation is the number one thing that, that, that people are looking for. And yet, when do you come up with our when do we come up with our best ideas? So, you know, even for you, Whitney, like, when is it that if you're working on a problem in your personal life or professional life, all of a sudden you get this aha moment? Like, what kind of activities are you doing?

Whitney Johnson: Well, it's usually early in the day when I'm more awake and my resources aren't depleted. And it's, it's oftentimes when I step away, take a walk and I have an opportunity to have ideas come together.

Emma Seppälä: Neuroscience research shows that we are most likely to get our aha moments, not when we're in a highly focused state. When we're in this sort of intensely concentrated work state or high-stress space. But when we are in alpha wave mode, which means when the brain, when the brain waves are not highly activated, as when you're concentrated or so relaxed that they're about to go to sleep. But in this in-between space, you can think of it as a meditative state of mind. So, it's often a time when you're in the shower, on a walk with your dog step, like you said, stepping away from your desk when you're in a calmer space.

Whitney Johnson: You know what, Emma, that makes me think of when you say that is that I remember being pregnant and, and you have children, right?

Emma Seppälä: Two.

Whitney Johnson: And so, I remember having that experience of, you know, you move around all day long. Go, go, go, go, go, go. But it was only when I would sit down, and I was still that the babies start to kick in the stomach. Do you remember that?

Emma Seppälä: Yes.

Whitney Johnson: And so, I think that's a metaphor for what you're talking about.

Emma Seppälä: I love that so much. That is such a great point. And, you know, we, we live in the US. There is. An idea that being idle is the devil's playground. Do not, you know keep working. Feeling guilty when you're not working is a good thing. You should always be productive. And yet, by doing that, we're preventing ourselves from coming up with our best ideas. You know, Whitney, you're a writer. I mean, I know that my first book was entirely written on hikes. It would be written in my head, and I would come down, and I would, and I would formulate it. And of course, there's the sweat that goes into the crafting it. But the, the ideas, the concepts come together in those moments when you are your mind is not in this actively focused state. Has that been your experience, too?

Whitney Johnson: It has been, but I've never articulated it or had someone articulate it for me in the way that you have of getting much more. And I'm sure I've read lots about this, but just getting much more intentional. And saying, oh yeah, that's exactly what happens, is I work and then I step away. And I get these ideas and then they come together, and then I write them down. And I work some more, and I get these ideas and there, there's a cycle to it. And, and if we could honor that cycle and honor that stepping away not just as a means to recharge, but that

the stepping away is part of the process of getting the brilliant idea. Then that could be an interim hack for those of us who are still focused on be productive, be productive, be productive.

Emma Seppälä: 100%. Einstein talked about it a lot. He spent a lot of time playing music. Someone else who tapped into that was Salvador Dali, the artist who created these incredible paintings. Right. What he would do is sit in a rocking chair and lull himself into a state of the sort of alpha wave mode or some people call the hypnogogic sort of state. But he would hold onto a key and there was a metal plate on the floor, and he would just sort of relax so he could go into that space and see those images that would come to him. But then, if he fell asleep, boom, the key would fall on the floor, wake him up, and he'd go back. I know that for me, when I'm working on, on writing, I definitely purposefully take time off. In fact, I did write for the podcast to just be in the woods, no phone, nothing. Just take those moments of nothingness, of, of quiet time, because I find that's when the best ideas are generated.

Whitney Johnson: You said something a moment ago, of this idea of we feel like, in order to be successful, we need to sacrifice ourself. Is that what you said? And in order to be successful, we must be stressed. And that just hit me right in the gut. I prescribe to that idea. I believe that that is part of what I believe. That's one of my mental maps. And so, as I'm listening to you talk about this idea of taking those breaks, which will allow you to be more productive. If I can put that in, that will allow me, initially to not feel like I'm sacrificed or feel like I'm still sacrificing myself even though I'm not. If that makes sense.

Emma Seppälä: It will allow for an element of self-care that will also, by the way, bring in a lot of joy to yourself. The irony of it is that when we take care of ourselves, we show up as our best selves in our work and also in our relationships, both at work and at home. And Whitney, I really just so appreciate how authentic you are just then. Because I think, you know, we've all fallen for this. This is, this is, what this is high-achiever US culture. It's a theory that's out there. It's well and alive and it's false. So, I'm on a Facebook alumni group for Yale, for Yale alumni. And one of the administrators was trying to spark conversation and maybe help some of the younger alumni out by asking, what do you do for a living and what would you advise to someone who wants to do that? Simple question, right? I was shocked by the answers. Most of the answers were highly successful people who hated their job and who said things like, "don't do things for money or prestige." Now they're looking back at 40 or 50, maybe 60, turning around and be like, I did it all for money and prestige and I am miserable. It was shocking. It was most of the replies were like that. Now, mind you, that was not the answer to the question as it was asked, but it was very interesting. Now, fast forward a couple of years, my colleagues ran a study at Yale asking undergraduates. They asked them, how do you feel? On average, the undergrad said, "stressed and tired." And then they were asked, how do you want to feel? And the undergraduates said, "Loved."

Whitney Johnson: Oh. Oh.

Emma Seppälä: Do you connect the dots?

Whitney Johnson: Oh.

Emma Seppälä: People everywhere are buying into this theory that they need to be successful in order to be loved. No amount of success will ever make you feel loved, especially when you're sacrificing yourself in the process. Because no amount of success will or any other relationship, for that matter, will ever make up for the hole in your heart from lack of friendship from yourself. Goals. That's why one of my goals is to question these destructive theories that are also false.

Whitney Johnson: The power in what you're doing is that by simply naming it. Of, oh, you think that if you're stressed out and you sacrifice yourself, that will make you happy. And by naming that. Or you're stressed out because you think that by doing that, that's going to help you feel loved. It allows us to say, oh, I do believe that. And if I believe that, do I want to continue to believe that, or do I want to do something differently? That brings up something else that you said. Which is, you say "compassion is the opposite end of self-centeredness." How did that insight come about? And it feels like it ties into what you've been saying.

Emma Seppälä: So, having looked at the research on happiness for the last 20 years, I can summarize it in one sentence. "The happiest people who live the most fulfilled lives that, by the way, are also healthier and lead to greater

longevity are the people who live lives characterized in some way by compassion, balanced with self-compassion." Going back to our discussion prior, when we're in a very stressed state because we're intent on doing whatever. I'm not talking about, I'm not talking about stress that comes at you through a pandemic, through a child that's sick, through a parent that passes away. Those are external stresses that are inevitable, and they are coming our way. And that's just human life. I'm talking about the amount of stress that we generate within ourselves through these sorts of false theories about success. And that's, those we can handle, those we, we have a say over, right? So, when we are in a state of stress, anxiety, negative emotion, we're in a self-focused place. Research shows that those emotions make us focus on ourselves, which makes sense, evolutionarily speaking. You know, if you were stressed, that's because you were being chased by a predator. It's probably better to be self-centered at that moment so you can get away. You don't want to get spaced out at that moment. But the problem with that is that if you're chronically stressed and chronically in that space of self-focus, you're unable to connect with others, which also removes your own happiness. Because we know that social connection is one of our greatest sources of happiness.

Emma Seppälä: But especially that internal sense of connection to others, it's not just about being around people, but actually feeling connected from within, which comes from a space of well-being. You'll notice that on a day when you're feeling happier, that's also a day when you feel greater belonging. When you hold the door open for an extra 10 seconds for someone where you, you, your cup is full, and it has room to spill out. You know, to spill out towards others. Which is why I talked earlier about compassion is important when balanced with self-compassion, your cup must be full in order to overflow. Right? So, going back to that research shows that compassion is the greatest source of happiness there is. And what's interesting is that we've all experienced this. You know, one example I like to give is, think of a day when you were having a "bad day" like, oh, I got this nasty email. I didn't sleep last night and such and such happened. Right. Oh, it's a terrible day. But then your friend calls you and they've actually just had something really bad happen to them. Like they're on the side of the road with a car accident or something. Right? And you rush to attention, you go over there, and you help them out and you're there 100%. How do you feel? Amazing, right? You feel incredible, there is something that happens to us when we live a life with more altruism.

Emma Seppälä: It doesn't mean you have to go feed orphans in a, you know, somewhere. It's simply an attitude of wanting to be of help, of wanting to be of service. It doesn't have to be grand. It can be very simple. Right. But what research shows is those people are happiest and they have lower inflammation at the level of their cells even. And the happiness. Usually, if we get happiness from things like sensory pleasures, like chocolate or more money or more likes on social media or, you know, whatever gives you that high. That high is very, very fleeting at the level of the brain. You get this high boom and then it's gone and then you craving for more. Right? Which is another thing that ties into success. You got that success. Oh, wow, that's so nice. You get a high and then boom, you're not high anymore. Now you want another, right? It's a sort of cycle which gets you nowhere, right? It's a hamster wheel. The happiness that's generated by a life that's characterized in some way by service or altruism. What research shows is that your brain on that type of happiness, it, it lasts. It lasts. It's and that's why I like to call it fulfillment more than happiness. That's a fulfilling life. And I think that's why a lot of people get so much fulfillment from taking care of their children or and so forth because all of a sudden there's this complete act of service. Right.

Whitney Johnson: Something you said a minute ago that I think is really powerful. Is for those of us, and I know a lot of people, probably most of the people that listen to this podcast have a desire to be of service in the world. And so, when I hear you say when I, or anyone is extremely stressed and not finding ways to manage the stressors. The stressors over which we have control, that that is at some level self-indulgent and self-focused, then we can't be of service. And so, that to me, and I suspect for many of our listeners, becomes a very powerful motivator for finding ways to reduce stress, to be happier, knowing that if not, you are focused on yourself and you are not able to look outward. That's really compelling for me.

Emma Seppälä: I think we've probably all been there where we felt drained. And when we're drained, you know, we want to be there for someone else, but our capacity is limited. But there is a way to have a more limitless capacity when you're giving to yourself as much as to others. And I do want to share this really interesting study by, run by some sociologists, including Nicholas Christakis, that looked at people who are happier, and then they looked at the three degrees of separation away from them. So, if you are happier, then your child's teacher's spouse is happier. It impacts three degrees of happiness.

Whitney Johnson: That's amazing!

Emma Seppälä: It is amazing. It's amazing. And I like to share that because this false notion that in order, that happiness somehow is selfish. It's like, well, great. It's actually an act of service, so, go ahead and be selfish for a little bit because when you take care of yourself, you become a gift to other people, especially if you have that motivation of helping.

Whitney Johnson: I got chills. I love that.

Whitney Johnson: So, we've talked about happiness generally, and one of the things you found in your research was the importance of breathing, and that helped you feel calmer and therefore be happier. And in trying to combine your work with mine, I'm thinking about the, the S Curve of learning, which is this visual model that helps you think about what growth looks like and how it feels. And so, as you can imagine, when you start something new, you're generally going to have this experience where the stress goes up because you're doing something you don't know how to do. And so, it can feel very overwhelming. And so, what I would love to do is do a little bit deeper, dive around the breathing, because my sense is, is that when you're starting something new, if you know how to breathe, you're going to be calmer and it's going to lower the anxiety of doing something new. And so, you talked about the research you did with veterans. Can you just tell us a little bit more about that research, maybe tell us a story around that, just to have people be able to really understand that as a way to move into the conversation around breathing?

Emma Seppälä: Absolutely. So, about nine years ago, my husband walked in the room, and I turned to look at him and he was pale. I said, what's wrong? And he said Jake was in an IED. So, Jake was his friend, who was a Marine Corps officer in charge of the last vehicle on a convoy going across Afghanistan. And he the vehicles all passed safely except for Jake's, which drove over an improvised explosive device. And, in that moment, I don't think we can ever even imagine that experience. The noise, the debris flying, the extraordinary pain, the, the shock. Especially when he looked down and saw that his legs were almost completely severed below the knee. He could see everything. So, in that moment, one usually would just go right into shock and probably pass out. But he remembered something that he had read about in a book, about what to do in a time of wartime, sort of extreme trauma like this. And it was a breathing exercise. And he began to breathe in that manner. And because he breathed in that manner, he was able to think clearly. Now, what happens when you have a very strong emotion is that you lose your cognitive and logical faculties, which is I think we've all experienced that in a time of strong anger or anxiety or fear. You can't talk your way out of it at that moment and no one else can either. You can't talk a child, for example, out of a tantrum. They're in that spot to where they're deep inside the anger or frustration.

Emma Seppälä: So, usually we don't have access to those logic. Well, because he did this breathing exercise, he tapped into his parasympathetic nervous system, which is the opposite of the sympathetic or the fight or flight. He calmed himself down in minutes, and he was able to regain his logical faculties and do his first active duty, which was to check on the other service members in the vehicle. It gave him the presence of mind to then do a second active duty, which was to give orders to call for help, and even gave him the presence of mind to tourniquet his own legs and to think of propping them upward. And only when all that was done did, he fell unconscious. He was urgently transported to Germany and then flown to Walter Reed, and he was told he would have died if he had not done what he had done. He saved his life with a breathing exercise in a moment of extreme stress. I always think if it saved someone in that kind of an extreme situation, what can it not do for us in our much less stressful and yet still stressful lives? Breathing is actually very much linked to our state of mind. You'll notice, for example, that different emotions are going to shift your breathing pattern.

Emma Seppälä: For example, anger and fear. Your breathing is going to be shorter and shallower. You're going to come home from a long day of work and just tired and flop down on the couch and sigh. Right, laughing, sobbing or other examples. Little kids running in the sprinklers in the summer. There are big bellies going with happy deep breaths. Right. So, but what's interesting is that you can also flip it around when you change your breathing, you can actually change your emotions. Now, actors know how to use this. They know how to use their breath to evoke an emotion which you can actually do. This has been shown in research studies. And when you, when you breathe in, for example, your heart rate increases, your blood pressure increases. And when you breathe out, they slow down. So, one exercise we could do, and you can try for yourself is just a very simple exercise where you breathe in for a count of four and breathe out for a count of eight with your eyes closed for a few minutes. And immediately notice a

shift because you're tapping into your parasympathetic nervous system. Something really great to do between meetings while transitioning from work to home before an important phone call. Any time that you feel that your mind is racing, or you need to just come back into a more present, clear, calm space.

Whitney Johnson: In your TED talk, you talked about how every emotion has a different kind of breath footprint. So, what would a happiness breath look or sound like?

Emma Seppälä: It would be a fuller, deeper breath that would go into the abdomen as opposed to the sort of shallow, rapid breaths of fear or anxiety, or anger.

Whitney Johnson: Yeah. And is calm would calm be similar a calm breath too?

Emma Seppälä: Yes. And in fact, once you start to pay attention throughout the day, you'll notice shifts. For example, if you go into a deep space of relaxation, you'll notice your breathing immediately starts to shift in its pattern. Perhaps like right before you go to sleep, you'll notice this. You start to go into this rhythmic breathing, right? And a lot of times we even forget to breathe right with anxiety and everything. We're holding our breath. And so, there is something so profound about learning to become aware of your breathing and also learning to shift it. So, there has been a lot of talk about, you know, watch your breath, you know, mindfulness, meditation, and things like that. But this goes beyond that. This is actually changing your breathing to change your nervous system and in turn, stabilize your mind. And we live in a time when we need things to work, work well and work fast because we don't have any time. I would argue that using your breath is the most efficient and effective way to do that. Now, we ran a study at Yale recently with undergraduates. Those stressed and tired undergraduates and we wanted to see what kind of well-being intervention would most prevent burnout and mental health through the course of the semester when usually mental health and burnout usually tend to suffer.

Emma Seppälä: And so, we actually randomly assigned students to either a mindfulness-based stress reduction group, an emotional intelligence group, where they mostly just learned cognitive skills, or a SKY Breath Meditation group, or a control group that didn't receive any treatment. And what we found is that while all the wellness groups supported the students to a certain degree, by far the one that had the greatest and most significant, statistically significant impact was the SKY Breath Meditation group. And we weren't surprised in the sense that we're not just addressing the mind, we're going through the body and the nervous system to stabilize the mind. So, it's actually very physiological. And this is so interesting to me because as a psychologist, I can tell you that is, you are probably very aware as well, there is a such a cognitive bias and such a change your mind, change your life, change your brain, change. You know, it's all about sort of top-down like I like cogito, ergo sum, right like I think therefore I am. And we've sort of, even as academics, there's a sense of just, oh, I have a body. Like I'm just this sort of brain walking around.

Emma Seppälä: No, but once we understand that approaching our well-being through the body actually profoundly impacts our mind in a much more sustainable way. So, the breathing exercise we just did is a really great one to just have in your back pocket and pull it out at any time or start your day that way or end your day that way. It's going to lead to a calmer space in minutes. That's fast. And then what I recommend for if you want to condition your nervous system to be in a more stable place throughout the day and sort of is more cultivating a state of psychological resilience to stressors, then I would say, you know like we go to the gym to train your muscles. Train, you can train your nervous system through that, too, through a longer protocol, like the SKY Breath Meditation that allows you to sort of on a daily basis condition yourself. So, a study run at Harvard, similar to ours, had similar findings. But they also found that when placed in a stressful situation, the people who had learned the breathing practices had less of a stress response. So, think of it as sort of stress resilience.

Whitney Johnson: Where can people find you for just people who are listening, they want to learn more about you and your work. Where's the best place to go?

Emma Seppälä: They can go to my website, which is EmmaSeppälä.com. I'm most active on Instagram at the moment, but I'm also on Twitter and I have a Facebook page as well and LinkedIn.

Whitney Johnson: What did you find useful in this conversation?

Emma Seppälä: Well, Whitney, I really find it useful how self-aware you are, because and, and self-aware, but also willing to be authentic about it. Which is of which is being vulnerable, really. And I think that whenever someone has that self-awareness, communicates that self-awareness, and that authenticity in a vulnerable way; it allows for everyone to breathe a sigh of relief, of recognition and of co-learning and of really learning more deeply that way. So, I love how you would how you how you responded and reacted.

Whitney Johnson: Hmm. And dare I say then my child teacher's spouse will become more self-aware.

Emma Seppälä: Happier. So, we know two things that if you're happier, three degrees of separation will be happier. And if you, and what you do, are of service, three degrees of separation will be, tend to be of greater service and a greater compassion. And I'll share one more study with you, because it's so moving. So, I want you to think about last time you observed someone maybe in a public space helping someone else. And do you remember how you feel when you see someone helping someone else? Like a stranger and someone's helping a stranger or something?

Whitney Johnson: Yeah, I feel. I feel moved by it.

Emma Seppälä: I feel moved. Exactly. And psychologically, psychologically, we call that a space of elevation. So, when you observe someone else helping someone, you feel elevated. In turn, you are more likely to go and help someone then. That's what happens. And so, there's this beautiful thing, the beautiful phenomenon that someone who's more compassionate, three degrees of separation around them become more compassionate. To me, I think this is how we create culture. You know, a lot of us are wandering around like I'm just this tiny little human being, you know, or like human being as, you know, Roald Dahl would say, we're just these tiny little beings. Like, what impact can I truly have? Like, well, actually, you taking care of yourself, you being happy, you being kind. You're creating ripples around you that you don't even know, and you will never actually know. And it is always, always worth it.

Whitney Johnson: Oh. So beautiful. Emma, thank you so much!

Emma Seppälä: Yeah, thank you. This was fun.

I have three huge takeaways from my conversation with Emma. Number one, no amount of success will make you feel more loved. We already know this in our hearts, but in our busy lives, in a busy world, it's hard to focus on it sometimes. Emma shared the research. People feel stressed and tired, but what they're always looking for is the human connection of love. Stop buying into the theory that people won't love you unless you've achieved something and heed Emma's advice. Don't sacrifice yourself in order to be successful.

Number two. Happiness is fleeting, but fulfillment lasts. I love Emma's framework here, eating a bite of chocolate or getting a like on social media. It makes us happy. But those spikes of happiness vanish quickly and leave us wanting more. Chasing the happiness high is not sustainable or healthy, especially when it comes to chocolate. Instead, Emma says that compassion and altruism is the pathway to fulfillment a more sustainable form of happiness. I love what Emma said about the value of taking your mind off your own problems and focusing on caring for others. This is not about comparing who has more struggles. It's about connection. Remember, happiness is contagious. Your child's teacher's spouse will be happier and more compassionate if you choose to be.

And that brings me to my third takeaway. To help your mind start with your body. We can't pretend that choosing happiness is easy. It takes work. Calming your mind is easier said than done. But Emma says start on the other end

with your body and with your breathing. They are more connected than we think. And Emma walked me through a fantastic breathing exercise that you can do with us.

Emma Seppälä: Yes. You want to shut down that major, you know, sense a sense organ of sight, and turn your attention inward and then you want your palms up, because when you have your palms up, you'll notice you can breathe more, more freely, and they can be on your lap. Before we start, I just want you to check into your own sort of state of mind so you can notice any shift from before to after. So, first, go ahead and notice how your body feels. You can take note about your energy levels at this moment where you fall on the spectrum of fatigued to energized. And notice any areas of looseness or tension in the body. And then we're going to just notice our state of mind. So, thoughts are constantly moving through our mind. If they were like, if each of our thoughts was a car, just notice your own level of traffic at the moment. Is it a highway or a country road? You can just notice for yourself. And then finally notice any feeling or emotion states that are there on a spectrum of positive to negative. Where do you land in terms of the feelings you have and also in terms of intensity? Where, where do those emotions land? Are they very intense or not at all? So, you're sort of taking note of your internal landscape at this moment so we can notice any changes before to after.

Emma Seppälä: So, go ahead. And now we're going to try and breathe in through the nose and out through the nose, because that's usually best for activating our parasympathetic nervous system. And if there are allergies or challenges breathing through the nose, at least try and do the inhale through the nose. So, go ahead and breathe in for a count of one, two, three, four. Hold and breathe out. Two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight. Breathe in. Two, three, four. Through the nose. Hold and breathe out. Two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight. Breathe in. Two, three, four. Hold and breathe out. Two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight. Breathe in. Two, three, four. Hold and breathe out. Two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight. Breathe in through the nose. Two, three, four, four. Breathe. Hold and breathe out. Two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight. Last time. Breathe in. Two, three, four. Hold and breathe out. Two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight. Keep your eyes closed. Relax and come back to normal breath. Okay. And notice any changes, perhaps in how your body feels or the traffic of thoughts in your mind.

For more on this topic, listen to another Emma. Emma McAdam, [Episode 243](#), where she provides practical tips on emotional regulation. For more on managing stress and burnout in particular, listen to Jennifer Moss, [Episode 238](#). You may also want to listen to [Episode 157](#), Susan David on navigating your inner-world feelings and self-talk. Thank you again to Emma Seppälä for joining us. Thank you for listening. Thank you to our producer, Matt Silverman, audio engineer and editor Whitney Jobe, and production assistant Stephanie Brummel.

I'm Whitney Johnson.

And this is Disrupt Yourself.