

Announcer:

Bulletproof Radio, a state of high performance.

Dave Asprey:

You're listening to Bulletproof Radio with Dave Asprey.

Dave :

Today's guest is someone that I really think you're going to love because I've done a bunch of interviews looking at the science of inflammation and coronavirus and it's been just top of mind for all of us so much. The real impact on our society, on our economy, on the fact that well, stress as specially economic stress is highly correlated with obesity and disease and things like that. This is not about that.

This is about the other side of things that's about the emotional side of what's going on, where we're actually taking more hits than we are even in our hospitals, I would argue if you look at it over time. Susan David's a PhD, award-winning Harvard Medical School psychologist who wrote a bestseller on emotional agility. That's actually the title based on 20 years of research into the psychological skills that you and me and all of us need to actually win when... oh, I love to say this, in these complex times, but basically when change is happening and bad news change always happens whether there's a virus or not, change happens every single day so basically resilience is the core of being bulletproof and emotional agility is the core of really being resilient.

Susan, welcome to the show. I'm really happy you're here.

Susan David:

Thank you. I'm delighted to be here as well.

Dave :

Now you're a CEO of Evidence Based Psychology, and I got to ask you straight up. Most of the evidence-based people that I've come across online are emotionally damaged people and what they're saying is I'm an angry skeptic and mine is evidence-based, but yours isn't. It's almost like a dig at everyone else because well, yours isn't evidence-based. Yours is woo-based.

Susan :

Woo-woo based. [inaudible 00:01:56].

Dave :

What does evidence-based mean to you?

Susan :

Well, really what I think is so essential is that so much of what exists in society in our narratives about emotions are really narratives that undermine our resilience and so really I think the essence of my work is that it is science-based, but it's also pragmatic and I hope that I conveyed in a way that feels very human and connected, but that at the core it's really about what do we know about the science of adaptability and well-being.

Dave :

In deciding to have you on the show, I looked at it and evidence-based truly means that it works. There's a reason for it to work and that it works and some of biohacking like it works. I can tell you that repeatedly it works and I have no idea why it works, but there is evidence that it does work. The mechanisms have to be known for there to be evidence, right?

Susan :

Well, often we don't actually fully understand the mechanisms.

Dave :

But we have evidence. If you do A, B usually happens and that's what you're looking for.

Susan :

Yeah, exactly.

Dave :

Okay. Good [crosstalk 00:03:01]. I would double down most of the coping skills that I learned or the myths I believed in when I was younger and working to become successful and successfully become successful. You can still be an angry jerk the whole time and so I wish that I'd understood some of the stuff that you're teaching in your book a lot earlier on in my career path. When it all checked out, I said, right, come on to the show but tell me emotional agility, you wrote a book on the topic. How do you describe that to someone in an elevator? It's like, what do you do? Because I don't know that I could describe it. I'm pretty good at that stuff.

Susan :

Well, absolutely. I mean the core of my work is really answering one question and this question is what does it take internally in the way we deal with ourselves, our thoughts, our emotions, and our stories that help us to thrive in the world, because fundamentally the way we deal with our inner world drives everything. It drives how we love and come to our relationships, how we live, how we parent and how we lead.

At its most basic level emotional agility is about the capacity to be with ourselves. That includes our difficult thoughts and emotions and stories and past experiences in a way that's compassionate and curious and that doesn't hold us back from being the people that we most want to be. Because often we get stuck in our thoughts, our emotions and our stories, and we aren't living in a way that's intentional and values congruent and so it's about these different aspects. The being with ourselves healthily and being able to move sometimes even when it's uncomfortable towards things that matter to us.

Dave :

One sentence here, emotional agility, right? I'm not trying to pick on you.

Susan :

It's about being healthy with yourself.

Dave :

Being healthy with yourself. Okay. Got it. It's around the voice in your head.

Susan :

[crosstalk 00:04:55] in psychology.

Dave :

Okay. Now, if someone doesn't have the emotional agility that you're talking about and oh, let's say that they're suddenly told that they don't have a job and by the way, stay at home. No getting a new job for you. What is going to happen to someone in that scenario without emotional agility if we're just playing the odds.

Susan :

Often what happens is when we experience difficult situations like the one you describe is we might not be practiced or effective with our emotions. On the one hand, you might have someone who loses their job and they brood on those emotions. They get so stuck inside their heads. They feel so victimized and struggling, that at a fundamental level they are not really able to regather themselves effectively so that they can deal with the situation that they're facing. That's one response that we [inaudible 00:05:50] of which co-brooding.

It's basically getting so stuck in the situation in the experience you're having, that you are inagile and you're not being effective. The other is when people [crosstalk 00:06:04].

Dave :

Let's pause before going onto that second one. Okay, I'm sitting at home. I'm eating my bonbons. I'm brooding and I'm not effective. I don't have a job anyway so who cares if I'm effective? Like what's the downside here really?

Susan :

Well, we care about it because firstly, when people brood there is a real cost. There's a real psychological cost.

Dave :

The cost of brooding.

Susan :

We know that people who brood... The cost of brooding. We know that when people brood on their emotions when they get stuck in their emotions, they have lower levels of mental health and well-being. It's actually predictive of depression and anxiety. We know that those people who do this in a habitual way, there's nothing wrong with just brooding today or bottling tomorrow but when we start to do this in a habitual way, we also know that it impacts on our relationships because we're so concerned about what we're feeling, that it's almost like we carrying a stack of books so close to ourselves, all of our emotions tugged into us. That we are struggling to connect with the people we love, our family, our children, support systems that might be in place and then the other cost of brooding is we know that when people brood, it actually takes up a huge amount of cognitive resource.

We're so focused on what's going on for us, that we actually become unable to problem solve or to find a pathway forward and if there's ever a time when you might need to find a pathway forward, it's

when you're feeling stuck at home and the world has been ripped from underneath you. We've got to be able to reconnect with ourselves so that we can move forward in the world.

Dave :

That makes so much sense. The real downside here is you're going to get caught in a brooding trap and you're going to take all of your time and basically think about I'm really hungry, what's in the fridge even if you're not really hungry and you're going to say, I'm brooding, I'm so angry at, insert whatever political party and or organization you're angry at, and you're not going to have anything left to be a good partner, to find a new job or to basically get your shit together, right? Because it's an energy leak, the way I look at it. Valid?

Susan :

Yes, and it's absolutely very often done with the way or the perspective that one has taken is often I'm trying to figure this out but it's getting so stuck in the experience that you actually are becoming victimized by the experience.

Dave :

It's the wallowing instead of grieving and moving on.

Susan :

Yes.

Dave :

Okay. That was one group of people, are going to go down this brooding path and that they had gotten the brooding trap. What about the other group?

Susan :

The other is what I might call bottling and bottling is where you push aside these difficult emotions. You might be someone who has this idea that I've just got to pretend that I'm happy or even looking at your situation and going, I don't deserve to feel what I'm feeling right now because there are so many other people suffering, and so what we start doing is we start judging ourselves for having difficulty emotions or pushing them aside, rationalizing. We see this again in a pervasive way where people who are experiencing cancer are automatically told to just be positive or someone who's angry because of systematic injustice in the world, stop being so angry.

What we have very often is this narrative that exists in our culture which is that these emotions like grief and anxiety, sadness, that they're somehow bad emotions and that they're not legitimate and so we push them aside and then of course you might say, "Well, who cares? What's the cost?" And the cost is the interesting be... brooding look so very different from bottling, but the cost is the same. When people push aside their difficulty motions, they are now not actually practiced in dealing with them and so they actually tend to become harder hit when they lose their job or when a relationship breaks down. There is a cost to their mental health, their well-being. Again, their problem solving because when you spend a lot of time trying not to think about a piece of cake in the refrigerator, what do you do? You obsess about the piece of cake in the refrigerator.

We know that when people try to push their difficult emotions aside, there's a rebound effect and what is often called leakage and again, it impacts on our relationships. This is in a way what

emotional inagility looks like when it comes to our inner world. We can also get emotional inagility in the way we often autopilot our lives and so we're not intentional in how we're living and that's another type of inagility.

Dave :

Your big TED Talk with 7 million views was called emotional courage.

Susan :

Yeah.

Dave :

What's the difference between emotional courage and emotional agility?

Susan :

Emotional courage is the short form language that we use to describe the TED Talk.

Dave :

Marketing. Got it.

Susan :

It's the title. It's the marketing title.

Dave :

Basically it was exactly the same ideas.

Susan :

It's the same ideas. Yeah. It's the same ideas and really these ideas are... you asked me earlier why do you say that this is evidence-based. Why do you say this is science-based? I think the science is really important because this is well-being in lives. We know that depression right now is... this is pre COVID. Depression was the leading cause of disability globally, outstripping heart disease and outstripping cancer.

For people to be healthy with themselves, with the inner worlds is, these are not soft skills. They're often described in businesses as being soft skills. These are the most fundamental skills that we can have as human beings. When we are walking in a world that is ever changing, will continue to change and these are the core skills that are going to shape our children's lives and our children's well-being.

Dave :

Let's assume that someone's listening right now and oh my God, I think I might be a bottler and my spouse is a brooder. Let's just deal with whatever they are right now. The first thing that you're most likely to do in a situation like that is say, I guess I'll work on some positive thinking and I'll wake up every morning and say, "I'm not a bottler. I'm not a brooder." What's going to happen when they do that?

Susan :

Well, positive thinking. So, just to be clear, I'm not anti-happiness or anti-positivity. What I'm going to say is going to make me think that I am, but I'm not. I love being happy and I'm actually a fairly happy person, but what's interesting is this, is firstly, when people say things like I shouldn't be this, I should be thinking that. I shouldn't be sad, I should be happy, or when we go on Instagram and we see memes that say positive vibes only. Let's chase happiness. This is the message that exists. What does this do? Let's look.

The first thing is, as I've already described, when people push aside their difficult emotions, emotions that I might add are normal emotions, we are experiencing threat. Our emotions helped us to adapt and survive in context of threat. If you are feeling sad or anxious or grieving or lonely right now, that is your emotions doing the job that they were evolved to do. What happens? The first is that when we push aside these difficult emotions in the service of forced or false positivity, what we are doing is we are not dealing with the world as it is. We are dealing with the world as we wish it would be.

Dave :

That's bottling.

Susan :

In other words, it's denial.

Dave :

Isn't that the same thing?

Susan :

It's basically... Yeah, entering into a space of denial because often people bottle by saying, I've just got to be happy. The other thing is that there is this amplification effect and then third is what we know is that people who try to be positive, positive, positive, over time actually become less happy over time. There's this really interesting thing that happens. The more we chase happiness as a goal, the more we chase happiness as an expectation, the less likely we are to actually be happy because happiness doesn't come through the pursuit of some kind of goal. It comes through living a life that feels values connected, aligned with who we want to be and congruent with our world and our experience.

Dave :

That's a pretty dark thing to say Susan. I mean, chasing-

Susan :

[inaudible 00:15:29].

Dave :

Chasing happiness fails, you're basically screwed. Actually, you sound exactly like the Buddhists, right? Like if you chase happiness, you won't get it. You have to stop and allow it to happen, but okay. We're dealing with someone who is bottled up. In fact, I used to do evidence-based bottling. I was very fancy in my bottling.

Susan :

[inaudible 00:15:47] perfect.

Dave :

I would be feeling all kinds of feelings and I'd be like, there's no reason for me to feel fearful or angry. In fact, it was usually fair. Therefore, I am not feeling fair. Therefore, I'll smile and I'll be happy, right? But it was because I didn't have a reason for it. I hadn't grasped this idea that like, maybe there isn't a known reason that I'm feeling this way right now, but feelings don't have to listen to logic because they're feelings not thoughts. I managed to unpack all that stuff, but it only took me some neurofeedback and some holotropic breathing and I was going to South America and God knows my path. I've talked about it enough on the show.

Okay. Back to our guest, who's saying I just lost my job. I have no money. My spouse is a brooder or a bottler and I'm not and like screw chasing happiness. What do I do right now? What do you tell them?

Susan :

A couple of things. First, I'm going to sound even more like a Buddhist right now, because I'm going to say, what is the power of really showing up to that emotion? That when you are pushing difficult emotions aside, as we've already explored you're engaging in some kind of denial and with that often then comes other coping strategies that compound our problems even further. When we are pushing aside difficult emotions, often what we are doing as well is we might be oversleeping. We might be abusing alcohol. There're a whole lot of things that we might be doing. These then become these addictive short-term coping strategies that again, compound, because when you come out of the situation now, not only do you not have a job, but you don't have a job and your relationship has broken down.

One thing that I think is just really powerful is, and I talk about this in my book, is the power of just showing up to the fact that is tough. We live in a world that almost over-proposes or overvalues this idea that we are all in a never ending ironman or ironwoman competition, where we've constantly got to be tough on ourselves. There's such power in just showing up to the pain of that experience. Like this is tough, so showing up compassionately is powerful, but the aspect of this is what I've been calling in these times, but also talk about in my book, is gentle acceptance.

What do I mean by gentle acceptance? It is what it is. It is what it is. What I am experiencing now in my work but also previously is that the more we try to control what is uncontrollable, the more we fight the world, the greater our level of suffering and so gentle acceptance is basically, it is what it is. When you walk outside and it is raining, gentle acceptance is, it's raining. Not gentle acceptance is, I'm going to pretend that it's not raining, which is you're bottling.

Dave :

A little dysfunctional.

Susan :

Or I'm just going to be... or why does it keep raining every time I go outside. Every time I think I've gotten control of the rain, it starts raining again. Like this is terrible, and so what you are starting to do is you're starting to enter into a space inside of you that is basically the space of struggle. Gentle acceptance is really this ability to show up to your emotions in ways that are compassionate and accepting.

That's not all of emotional agility because there are other aspects to it, but we don't get to create change in our world until we accept what it is. It's not passive resignation but the paradox of

human living, is that we are only able to make change when we accept what is. It's only when the city stops being bombarded that we are able to start rebuilding and so this is why there's just such power in showing up to what is, even if what is is difficult and even if what is are experiences that feel uncomfortable and experience of grief might be an example.

Dave :

You sound like you've rebranded stoicism. How much of emotional agility is like from Seneca 3000 or 2000 years ago? It's a real question and that's not an accusation at all. Yeah.

Susan :

I think that like... If you look at modern psychological thinking, there are different aspects of psychology some of which say, when you have difficult emotions push them aside. Look at whether those emotions are rational, do that, and then there's this other aspect that has many more of its roots in more Buddhist thinking or in... there's a long history to a lot of these roots but I think what is really important again from this evidence-base is that what we're looking at in modern psychology is not just this idea of when you're feeling said, this is something that may be a good thing to do. It's like, what does the research actually tell us.

What the research tells us is that when you try to push aside these difficult emotions, they come back. Internal pain always comes out. What is effective or ineffective in the way we cope? How do we bring our values forward? These are the kinds of pursuits that we know from modern psychology can be supported.

Dave :

It feels to me as a non-expert modern psychologist that the coming together of much of stoicism which is not obviously ignore your emotions, it's accept what is, and then the Buddhists become aware of reality and the nature of all those things and modern psychology is how much of what's happening to you right now is run through your bottling filter or your brooding filter or these other things but when you start kind of putting the rants saying, what really is, you end up somewhere else. Back to the skills, you talked about emotional agility and then gentle acceptance.

Now we've got the person sitting at home. They're all pissed off in one of those two states and they say, okay, great. Now I've heard from Dave and Susan telling me, oh, I should just gently accept the fact that my landlord is going to kick me out and whatever other stuff is playing in their head. What is the process of gently accepting how trashed you actually might be in reality? And then how do you turn that around?

Susan :

Yeah. Can I give a personal story-

Dave :

Please.

Susan :

...and then [crosstalk 00:23:05]?

Dave :

Please, anything you like. You're here to teach.

Susan :

Okay. One of the things I talk about in my TED Talk, as you can hear from my accent that I grew up in apartheid South Africa. I was a white South African growing up in apartheid South Africa. I lived in a white community and it was a community and a country that was really committed to not seeing. It was committed to denial, not gentle acceptance. Denial. When I was around 15 years old, my father was diagnosed with terminal cancer, and I recall my mother coming one Friday to tell me to go and say goodbye to him. They knew that he was likely going to die that day and so I went and I said goodbye to my father. I recall his eyes being closed, but him knowing that I was there and I had this really powerful feeling of being seen, because with my father I had always felt seen. I'd always felt seen.

I kissed him goodbye and I went off to school and that day my father died and then on the Monday, my mother said to me, "Susan, we've got to try to keep things as normal as possible. It's Monday, you should go to school." I describe in my TED Talk how I kind of drift from Monday to Tuesday, May to July to September, and I'm going about, and people are saying to me, "How are you doing?" And I'm doing what you described with your smile that you plaster around and you say, I'm okay. I'm okay. I'm the master of being okay, because we live in a world that values people being okay, but we weren't okay. My family was struggling. My mum was raising three children. She was mourning the love of her life. The creditors were knocking, and so I as a child started to do exactly what I'm describing in more academic terms in our conversation, which is I started to spiral down.

I started to use food to numb my pain and for me as so many young girls do, it was binging and purging. Refusing to accept the weight of my grief. This comes to the answer to your question which is, I had this incredible English teacher and she handed out these blank notebooks and she said, "Write. Just write." There were notebooks to the class, but I felt it was an invitation to me. Tell the truth, write like no one is reading. I felt invited to, for the first time, show up to my pain and it's such a simple act. Showing up to your pain is such a simple not simple act. It's that for me, it was this quiet revolution and it was the revolution that really shaped my life and what then turns into emotional agility and my research.

Coming back to this person who's in pain. This person is in pain. It's not just that this person is feeling, oh, like the world is shit. It's like I'm in pain. That pain might be a lack of belonging, a feeling of rejection, of not having place in society, of being unseen, of grief. If you've built a business over decades and that business goes through nothing that you have done, there is so much going on and there is power in showing up to that. Now, what does that look like? What it looks like is the acceptance that I spoke about, which is what is happening for me. It's the compassion. It's the compassion of saying, fuck, this is shit. Like this feels shitty. Like this is shitty and myself, African, Australia, and New Zealand accent.

Just naming it is powerful but then what I would invite is something beyond that, and this is where the science comes in and we're starting to move beyond the stoicism and it's this, which is that we want to be able to show up to our emotions because our emotions contain really important signals to us. They are critical. As I mentioned, they helped us to survive. They've evolved for us. Our emotions contain data to the things that we care about. This is really important. Our emotions contain data about the stuff that we care about. I'm not saying, oh, just notice your emotions in a stoic way.

What I'm saying is that our emotions are valuable. If you feel grief, what is that grief? That grief is love looking for its home. That's what grief is. What's loneliness? If you imagined writing on a piece of paper or your person, your imaginary person, or not imaginary person. Millions of people out there writing on a piece of paper what loneliness is, that's what they're feeling right now. If you turn that piece of paper over, what are the values that that loneliness is pointing to? It might be yearning. It might

be connection. It might be the message that social distance is not the same as emotional distance and I need connection.

Our difficult emotions are signposts to the things that we care about. When we push them aside in unhealthy ways, we lose our capacity to adapt in the world because we lose our capacity to move forward in ways that we care about, and I'll just give you like one other example, which is, I spoke to someone last week, and this is now someone who has a job but she also has three children at home that she's trying to homeschool and-

Dave :

That's rough.

Susan :

...she's [crosstalk 00:29:41]. Yeah. She's like completely, completely overwhelmed and stressed. For her, what she was describing was this unrelenting feeling of guilt. What is the guilt? The guilt is that she's become so focused on how her children are doing at school and whether they're doing their homework and all the Zoom calls that she's on, that her guilt is that she basically feels like a bad parent. Okay. What is the emotion? The emotion is guilt. What is that emotion pointing to in terms of our values? What's it shining a light on. It might be that it's shining a light on the fact that you care about presence and connectedness with your children. Even though you are nagging them 24/7, what you're missing is the presence and connectedness.

This is really, really important because the world will tell us how we should be. The world will tell us what success looks like but ultimately if we aren't living in a way that is connected with who we want to be as people, then we are going to be unhappy and that's why chasing happiness for the sake of it doesn't happen, but trying to love in a way that feels values aligned is what's helpful.

Dave :

What did your friend do to get over her guilt or to incorporate her guilt or...

Susan :

Firstly, often when we are experiencing difficulty emotions, we use very big umbrella labels to describe what it is we're feeling. I'm stressed, is what my friend was describing. I'm stressed, I'm stressed, that's the most common one we hear, but there's a world of difference between stress and anxiety, stress and disappointment, stress and that knowing, feeling that I'm in the wrong job or the wrong career or that this business might be failing. What we know and what I've found in my work is that when we do something again, that's very subtle but very powerful, we take this emotion that we are using a big umbrella term for, and we start labeling it accurately. This is disappointment, or this is exhaustion. I'm absolutely exhausted.

Then what it does for us is it helps us to begin to understand the cause of that emotion and what it is we need to do about it. Again a person who's sitting at home who might be really struggling might be saying, I feel really stressed, but that stress for that person might be lonely, it might be disappointed, it might be unseen, it might be... there's different things that that person might be experiencing and we can only start both showing up to our emotions but also moving forward with them when we understand what those emotions are.

Number one, see if you can label your emotions accurately because labeling your emotions accurately will start helping you to understand the cause of the emotion but also what it is you need to

do. Do you need to give yourself your own time out? Do you need to reach out and get support? What is it that you need to do? That's one strategy that may be helpful. Another is, and this does actually connected a little bit more with mindfulness. I don't believe in just this idea of like mindfulness for mindfulness' sake. Put out the trash and be mindful about it and drink your cup of water and be mindful.

It's really difficult being mindful in every moment, every situation but when we want to be mindful, often we want to be mindful when we are hooked into ways of being that are not serving us. What do I mean here? I spoke earlier about how I don't... the research doesn't support this idea that we've just got to enter into some kind of denial and pretend we're happy all the time. That it doesn't work. There is nothing, there is nothing inherently good or bad about any thought emotion or feeling that we have or any story that we have. We as human beings have stories that help us to make sense of our lives. We have to create stories about our world because it helps us to figure out what we need to pay attention to and what not to.

I know that my child crying in pain is something I need to pay attention to, but the washing machine in the background is something that I can zoom out of. As human beings, there is nothing inherently good or bad about any thought emotion or story. It is what it is. It just is what it is. This idea that if we have a so-called negative thought that we're going to somehow manifest it and bring about a terrible chain of consequences for us, it's just... We have around 16,000 spoken thoughts every single day and thousands more course through our minds. Thousands of emotions course through our minds, thousands of stories. I can't it take it today. Gee, I've got to give this person feedback. I wish I didn't. Why do I always get the... we've got this, there is nothing wrong with any of it.

Dave :

Isn't it a huge waste of time? I mean, if bottling is a huge waste of energy and brooding is just a waste of energy, isn't having a really unproductive angry voice in your head a huge waste of energy?

Susan :

Our thoughts just are our thoughts. They are our body and our psychology doing the job that it was meant to do, which is to protect us, to look out for ways that we might be tripped up by Dave, to look out for potential people who are out to hurt us, to protect ourselves from things that might go wrong. Our brains and our psychology, our emotions were designed to protect us. Of course, we're going to be judgmental and critical and have difficult thoughts, emotions, and feelings. Here's the thing. There's nothing inherently wrong with any of it.

What becomes definitional of being inagile is when our thoughts, our emotions, and our stories stop us from bringing the best of ourselves forward. When we push them aside, when we get stuck in them, or when we have the thought that we want to trip someone and we then actually do it and doing it goes against our values. Really what I'm describing here is, when are we inagile? When we are inagile, it's when we get stuck in a thought. I'm not good enough and therefore I'm not going to put my hand up for the job. An emotion, I feel sad and so I'm just going to stay in bed today. A story, some of our stories were written on our mental chalkboards in grade three about who we are, whether we're good enough, what kind of love we deserve and those stories and thoughts and emotions can imprison us.

They can stop us from reaching out or being who we want to be, and so another way we can unhook. I started this talking practically, is by noticing those thoughts, emotions, and stories for what they are. Instead of, I am sad. When you say I am sad, what are you doing? You are defining all of you by that emotion. I am being undermined. You are defining that experience as effect that you are being undermined. There's such power in noticing your thought, your emotion or your story for what it is. I'm

noticing the feeling of being sad. I'm noticing that this is the thought that I'm being undermined. What you're starting to do is create linguistic space and this is literally linguistic space between-

Dave :

That's a big deal. What you're saying right now. Absolutely.

Susan :

It's huge, because now you're able to create... You've probably heard many times on this podcast that the Viktor Frankl idea between stimulus response, there is a space and in that space is our power to choose and it's in that choice that lies our growth and freedom. When we are hooked, there's no space between stimulus and response. We feel something and we believe it and we act on it. When we stop noticing the thought emotion, the story for what it is, ah, that's my, I'm not good enough story but I still choose to put my hand up for this job because I value learning. I value growth. Then we can be uncomfortable in that but we're moving in the direction of our values.

That noticing of your thought emotion story, just by naming it as a thought emotional story is extraordinarily powerful.

Dave :

You're going from feel, believe, act, to feel, believe, think, act, which is going to create a difference there.

Susan :

It's the power of the pause. It's the power of recognizing again, to use a metaphor that you... when you say I am sad, you are basically defining yourself almost if you imagine a cloud in the sky. You're defining yourself by the cloud, I am sad. But human beings, you're not the cloud. You are the sky. As human beings, we are complex and capacious enough to have many different emotions and then there's other things that we've got as well. We've got our intentions, our values, who we want to be, what we desire in our life and we can make space for that as well.

Dave :

This linguistic space idea is a really big thing because if you look at language structure and people who are from Europe who speak other European languages, it's very normal to say, I feel hunger. It would be how you'd say it in Italian or something and by the way, I am like the worst foreign language person. I'm like the opposite of Tim Ferriss. Everything said in Swedish or French sounds like someone chewing on marbles. I don't even hear the sounds, auditory processing, whatever so I apologize to my wife in advance because I still don't understand anything in Swedish.

What the structure of languages is, is I feel this. I experience this and what we say in the U.S. is I am this and by defining ourselves with, oh, I am hungry. Like that is really not going to do well for your eating habits. You say, I feel hunger. You have completely changed what's going on in your head. I love it that you're putting it out not just for hunger, but for everything and it's because of the structure of the English language that we do this.

Susan :

Yes, it's so powerful. We see the same happening in addiction. There was this really fascinating study that looked at when people were trying to manage their urges around hunger. They did this fascinating

piece of research where they actually asked these people to walk around with chocolates. There you are, you're trying to manage your urges and instead of going, oh, I'm not hungry. I just don't want to think about it because we know that when we try not to think about that chocolate, all we want is the chocolate. When we bottle that emotion, it actually, again, has this amplification.

This wonderful research that looks at, okay, so what if you ask people to carry chocolates around with them? And when they're feeling the urge to have a chocolate, all they're doing is they're saying, I'm noticing that I'm having the urge to have a chocolate and it's normal to have this urge because it's something that I might want and you being compassionate with yourself and what we find is that when people just notice the urge for what it is but in the way that I'm describing, it's curious and it's compassionate, they are much more likely to get over addictive types of behaviors because they're now not defining themselves and... The psychological term for this is fusion. They're not fusing themselves with the emotional, with the thought.

Dave :

All right. How dysfunctional or functional is this? If I was working on some like that, I would actually say to myself, my body feels hunger. I'm not even identifying my consciousness with my body and some psychologists, people like, oh, Dave, I don't know, you need to be more connected to your body and then from my perspective, I like Altered Carbon. I don't know if you've ever seen the TV show, but pretty much... Look, call me a little bit Buddhist reincarnation. This is a sleeve, right?

At a certain point, I am not going to be my body and maybe I'll be dead and nothing will happen but then still I'm not my body so whatever. Like, I'm in here for a while and it wants all sorts of weird stuff I don't want. Like it wants to eat when I really want to eat and it wants to run away when I want to run. Like generally it has great wisdom. It's also completely stupid half the time and it's my job to decide. Am I completely creating like some sort of weird psychological damage to myself with this mindset or is this a functional way of saying it's not even just me experiencing it's my me experiencing?

Susan :

Well, I will say being able to connect with what it is you experience in your body can be actually kind of helpful okay.

Dave :

There is [crosstalk 00:43:56] in there.

Susan :

...your anxiety et cetera, but speaking about say linguistic, the linguistic skills that help us to perspective take. Let me give you an example of one of them. Imagine you're trying to make a really difficult decision. Like LeBron James was making many years ago about whether to transfer one team to the next and you start saying, so what should your LeBron James do? Like you're experiencing this difficulty and you start talking to yourself in the third person. An example might be, imagine I'm Susan Dave , which I am and instead of saying, what should I do? I'm saying, Susie like this is a really tough decision. What do you think you should do right now?

We're actually doing the same with what you're describing with your body, which is you're taking a kind of third person perspective around your experience. Now, what do we know about this? We know that this is incredibly powerful to be able to do. I'll give you an example that I've seen so often in my work of how this operates. Imagine someone's feeling really stuck and you say to them, "You're feeling really stuck. What do you think you need to do about the situation?" The situation could be

marriage that's not working, or I want to start this business, or anything and the person says, "I don't know. I'm stuck." And you say to them, "Well, what are some ideas that you've got about how to get unstuck?"

I don't know, that's why I'm having the conversation with you. That's why I'm talking to you because I don't have any ideas. Then you say them, "I want to bring another person into this room. Think of the person that you know that is the wisest, most caring, loving person who has your best interests at heart. What does that person advise you to do?" And this individual that I'm having the conversation with says, they advised me to do this. They advise me to do that. Now, isn't it fascinating. It's the same person, but simply by bringing a different perspective and I describe some of these skills in emotional agility, just by bringing a different perspective and observer perspective into the context we generate solutions and perspective taking is powerful. Perspective taking is the bedrock of empathy when you are so stuck in this tragedy.

Sometimes there's just power and I... In the midst of COVID and my husband's a physician than my children at home that I'm homeschooling and there's all of the stuff going on and of course, I'm speaking to you from my bedroom right now and so I, on the one hand could be, oh my goodness, even in the shadow of this... and it is a tragedy. It is a tragedy, but sometimes when I'm having a really tough day, I imagine that actually I'm not in a tragedy. I'm in a comedy and I don't mean a comedy in the suffering because of course, the suffering is horrific and it's very front and center for me in my work but I'm really talking about for me when I'm having a tough day and I'm trying to unhook or when I'm so caught up in my, oh, I've got to do this and I've got to do that.

Sometimes just imagining that I'm in a comedy, my own comedy rather than my own tragedy can just free me. Again, this is perspective taking. This is now moving on in emotional agility from showing up to our emotions that gentle acceptance into now starting to create space between us and our emotions because to circle back, I started off saying our emotions are data. Our emotions are data. Our emotions contain signpost to the things we care about, but our emotions are data that are not directives. Just because I feel upset doesn't mean I need to have it out with my boss. We own our emotions that aren't on us and so we want to be able to harness the wisdom that comes from our emotions, but we don't need to be dictated. We don't need to be dictated by them.

Dave :

I very much like that perspective taking thing. It reminds me of Napoleon Hill, Think and Grow Rich. One of the exercises is... This is a book I read when I was 16 or something. He says, you'll sit down a group of people... you're doing this all in your head and imagine you've got, whoever you think is most admirable from all of history and you want God, sit him down. You want Buddha, sit him down. You want Thomas Jefferson, whatever, and then go around and ask them what they would think. Of course, this is all in your head and all those different perspectives and you sit there. Now your problem is solved and it's not like this is new information, but it's hard to do.

Do you recommend combining it with journaling? I mean, should people write that down? Because you mentioned earlier, journaling is a great way to deal with this. I mean, should you ask yourself and then write it down. Write with a right hand, left hand. Are there any hacks for this?

Susan :

You can absolutely use journaling and we can speak about some of the power of journaling as well, if that's helpful, but yeah. Sometimes even just... If you're getting stuck, for instance, in your identity like sometimes we get stuck in our identity as of this person, or I'm an accountant, or I'm an entrepreneur. We get stuck in our identities and sometimes even just writing our name on a piece of paper and just

looking at these squiggles of your name on a piece of paper that has come to almost define and embody you, but actually it's just squiggles on a piece of paper, is a way of perspective taking. There are many different ways.

Journaling is very, very powerful. What I describe to you earlier about my experience in journaling after my dad died was that for the first time, I felt almost this invited to show up to the emotions and it's really interesting when you look at journaling. There is this fascinating research that shows that when people journal and it doesn't need to be this brooding journaling, writing at a cafe for 15 hours every day about how I feel. It can actually be 20 minutes a day for three days. We have done in psychology a number of experiments on this. Looking at, for instance, when people are laid off from their jobs, the example that you gave earlier.

You might have people who are laid off, one group of people is asked to just write about the cars passing on the street. The other group of people is asked to write about their feelings about being laid off and what this means and the stress that it's brought about for them. What we start finding is that the people who write about these emotionally salient and difficult experiences, that over time those individuals are more likely to be rehired quicker. They are more likely to find their way through the situation and so it kind of begs the question, what is it that is happening when one journals? By the way, it doesn't have to be journaling.

Sometimes speaking to a really wise friend who helps you to see a situation differently can be powerful. You look at people who write about emotionally difficult experiences, it doesn't even have to be a difficult experience. It can even be I'm starting a business and I'm excited about it but I'm scared. Okay. You can even write about exciting things. The embodiment here is that it needs to be something that is emotionally salient for you. It's emotionally evocative. What we find is six months later, the people who've done these little bits of journaling tend to be more likely to move towards their goals. They have better mental health, better well-being and so it starts really to speak to these ideas of emotional agility, which is that pushing the emotions aside doesn't work. Going to them but processing them in healthy ways does, and what is it about the journaling? What is it?

When we look at this journaling, it's the people who are not being Pollyanna. They're not just being, oh, I'm looking for the silver lining here. This is all wonderful. Those people tend not to do well. The people who do well through the journaling are the people who've used positive emotion words, yes, but they've also used some negative emotion words. They've what it is that they're feeling and they're starting over time to generate a sense of insight. They'll say things like, I didn't want this to happen. I didn't invite it, but I've learned from it, or this is a new way of being that I'm seeing.

Dave :

When I started doing that kind of work in my... probably when I was about 30. I did like my first oh, there's stuff going there. It actually scared the crap out of me, the stuff I would journal. I'm like, wow. I'm kind of an angry asshole. There was actually a great amount of self-judgment there like, wow, what's going on with all that? At a certain point, I've kind of done my work. I shut off the vast majority of the annoying voices in my head, neurofeedback and 10 day meditation things and [DePaul 00:53:50]. A lot of stuff. I did find that journaling was a massive part of it and then I just quit. Like I have other stuff to do. If I have 20 minutes, I'd probably rather do breathing exercises. You're mentioning three days, 20 minutes is the minimum effective dose for journaling, but maybe more is better.

Susan :

The research shows that these writing exercises that happen in a circumscribed 20 minutes a day for three days can be enormously helpful. That doesn't mean if you do it for longer it's not going to be helpful. It's just-

Dave :

Okay. I wouldn't have been done in three days.

Susan :

I think the important point here as well though, is that you can journal or one can journal in a way that's brooding. That's just venting, venting, venting.

Dave :

Yeah, okay.

Susan :

Okay, and so think of, for instance, you're upset because you've had a fight with someone and so you got with your girlfriend or with someone and you have a big fat moan over a cup of coffee about why this person that you've had to fight with is so terrible. Okay. What you're doing there is you're no longer brooding. You are co-brooding. Okay. You literally are like brooding with someone about your mother-in-law or someone who you don't like. This is co-brooding and what's really fascinating is that again, once you've co-brooded with someone you tend to like that person better because they got you, they gave you a time to vent, but you actually feel worse about the person that you've had the argument with, and it might be your spouse or your mother-in-law and you actually come back to that situation with worse behaviors.

What we want to be aware of... this very consistent line that runs through my work is that when you're doing your journaling or when you're leaning on someone for social support, that you are not just brooding with the person. There's this intent that comes through it of being curious of trying to understand, of trying to work things out and so when you ask me for my definitional aspect of emotional agility, and I said, it's being compassionate, it's being curious and it's being courageous because the curiosity part is the, what is the emotion telling me? How can I be curious about this thing that I'm facing and it's that that helps us to unhook.

Dave :

That makes so much sense. I'm actually writing that one down. Compassionate, curious, and...

Susan :

Courageous [crosstalk 00:56:26].

Dave :

Courageous can rebound writing. That makes sense, and I want to put you on the spot here though, because all right, you're an expert in emotional agility. You literally wrote the book on emotional agility. Now your husband's a doctor at Massachusetts General, and you suddenly find yourself homeschooling two kids who are preteens. Your family's on the front lines of the pandemic. You have all the concern about that. You have all the disruptions during your day that you didn't have before from children. You're the perfect example of what have you done to enhance or maintain your emotional agility. If

you're a New York Times reporter trying to find someone to interview who had all the... like you're perfect.

Susan :

Well, I want to give you an example later of my imperfection, because whenever I talk about this, it's like do I have fights with my husband? Do I spend three days in a snit with him? Of course I do. Of course I do. All of these for all of us are practices, and we know that these practices are meaningful. What is it that I'm doing when I'm having a tough day? I really... I think what's become my mantra is, it is what it is. It is what it is. I think that's been really powerful for me. Another aspect that I'm really trying to focus on is to let go and sometimes letting go is a choice. It's let go of what I cannot control.

I cannot control whether some politician says something or doesn't say something in their speech. I can't control whether people in my neighborhood using N95 masks or not wearing masks or using... There's so much that I can't control and I'm trying to be really conscious of choosing to let go of what I can't control. That's been really important. Within that, there's some things that I can control. The basic building block of our ability to be agile and effective is actually born of our health and our well-being and that includes things like getting enough sleep and eating effectively and so these things can not fall by the wayside during this time. They're critical and this is a long-term thing that we need to be doing, and then a third is how am I trying to connect with my children during this time?

My children are... they're actually pretty happy with everything. They don't have to go to school and they've found a groove and they're... but every once-

Dave :

They get to sleep in.

Susan :

And they get to sleep in. They get all that stuff, but they're also having tough days and so I think that there's... all of these principles and I've got a whole chapter in my book, Emotional Agility, about dealing with our children in a way that's emotionally agile, because I think how erring as parents is to jump in and if a child comes home from school and says mommy, Jack wouldn't play with me today, or Jack didn't invite me to his birthday party now I'm not going to invite him. What you're seeing is a child that has no space between stimulus and response? The child is fused, they're hooked and so our erring as a parent is to say, oh, Jack, didn't play with you today, oh, Jack didn't invite you to his birthday party. Don't worry, I'll play with you. Let's go back cupcakes. I'll phone Jack's parents and figure this out.

Our erring done with really good intentions is to jump in and to try help our children to be happy but what are we doing? When we do that we are signaling to the child again, that there are good and bad emotions. We are signaling that being happy is a good emotion, but that sadness or frustration is a bad emotion. Our children are going to be traveling through life where the pandemic might be one of a number of pandemic experience. They will one day lose their job or it will be automated, or their hearts will be broken and so we need to give our children the skills to help them again, to deal with the world as it is not as we wish it to be.

When we telegraph to our children, oh, don't worry, I'll jump in and I'm going to force happiness, we actually take away our children's capacity to learn and experience and practice emotional agility skills. What I'm trying to do with my kids is, when my kids are having a tough day, is to not just jump in. If you feel upset because someone didn't invite you to their birthday party, that child is feeling sad and as a parent showing up to that sadness and saying that's tough. That feels bad. This is powerful

for children. It helps to give them a sense of secure attachment that they can feel and be what they need to feel and be and they will still be loved. That's the showing up part.

The second part we spoke about labeling emotions, so helping your child to label their emotion. The child who says I'm angry because Jack didn't invite me to the birthday party. It actually sounds like you're sad or disappointed, or you felt rejected. That's the labeling, the helping to step out and then third, when our children are going through difficult experiences is helping them to understand their own values, their own why, because this is the moral compass that will help them in a world that is going to need them to have a moral compass, and so these are the questions that might be... you said, because Jack didn't invite you to his birthday party and I might be tempted to tell you, well, you have to invite him to yours because you're inviting everyone else and you can't leave that one child out but what I could be asking instead is it sounds like you feel really sad that you've been rejected and that friendship is really important to you.

What does being a good friend and look like? How could you be a good friend in the situation? How can you be a good friend to others? And you're doing something so powerful because one day your child is going to turn 16 or 26 or 36, and someone is going to come to the child and say, I've got this great idea. Let's let the air out of the school principal's tires, car tires. Your child's going to be going, ah, on the one hand I want to feel accepted but on the other hand I have the sense of disquiet and I'm not practiced in noticing my disquiet and I'm also practiced in creating space. That I'm not just acting on my impulse of what feels good in the moment and I'm able to get a sense of who I want to be.

These are these foundational skills coming back to this evidence-based you were talking about. We know that children who are able to label their emotions more effectively are able to self-regulate and that these studies are predictive decades down the track hence-

Dave :

Wow. That's so powerful.

Susan :

...that's what I'm trying to do with... but in a long answer to your very short question, I'm trying to show up to them. I'm trying to show up to them.

Dave :

Well, it sounds like you're doing a fantastic job of it. Susan, I really appreciate you taking time to be on the show today. I know it's a busy time for you. I think your book stands the test of being truly evidence-based. Emotional Agility is worth reading for anyone who's dealing with pandemic stress right now. If you're listening to the show and you're saying, wow, it's a bit weird right now. There are some skills in here. You go to [susandavid.com](http://susandavid.com), which is Susan's website, or you can buy her book. You guys know how to buy books, I don't have to tell you how.

As always, if you purchase a book and you like it just like you wouldn't ever order a cup of coffee without leaving a tip for your barista, you should never read a book without leaving a review. Go to Amazon and click a review and if it deserves five stars, give it five. If it deserves one, give it one but at least leave a review because tell me the truth, isn't... Do you look at your reviews? Do they help you shape your work?

Susan :

People's questions help shape the work and of course reviews, they help to get the word out to other people and so that's meaningful to me.

Dave :

It's like leaving a tip. If you guys are enjoying Susan's work or heck if you like this interview, leave a review on iTunes or you could just sit there and do some of those other dysfunctional behaviors we talked about before. Either be a good person, leave a review or be a bad person, and don't leave a review, we'll still love you. See you on the next episode.

Susan :

Thank you.