

Making *Positive* Psychology Work

#102 - SUSAN DAVID CHEAT SHEET

Susan David is an award-winning psychologist on the faculty of Harvard Medical School, co-founder and co-director of the Institute of Coaching at McLean Hospital, and CEO of Evidence Based Psychology. She's the author of the bestselling book *Emotional Agility* based on her concept that Harvard Business Review heralded as a management idea of the year. Susan has worked with the senior leadership of major organizations including The United Nations, Ernst & Young, and the World Economic Forum. Here are the take-aways from my interview with Susan:

- Rigidity about emotions being either positive or negative, good or bad, can lead to overvaluing some emotions and undervaluing others, which can be toxic in an increasingly complex world. By undervaluing emotions such as sadness, anxiety or anger you risk losing the opportunity to learn from these emotions and adapt to a world in which life's beauty is inseparable from its fragility. And being overly dichotomous about what emotions are good or bad can lead to judgments about yourself - you can become worried that you're worried, or unhappy that you're unhappy.
- Emotional agility is being willing, curious, and compassionate to navigate the full range of human emotions. When you regard your emotions as data rather than directives you see the potential in all your experiences, and your most difficult emotions as signposts to the things that you value most. For example, sadness can indicate a search for how you can do better in this world, social anxiety can prompt you to want to connect better with those around you, and boredom in the workplace is a sign you're ready to grow or be challenged. And when you act in ways that connect you to these values you can move towards more authentic happiness and flourishing in your life.
- Difficult emotions are part of who we are, particularly in organizations going through change, innovation or upheaval. Being open to the full range of your emotional experiences is critical for building psychological safety - being able to bring the context of yourself and your views to your organization without being judged, pushed aside, or being scapegoated. And to pursue effective innovation you need to be open to failure because innovation happens through trial and error.
- Organizations often have a well-intentioned list of things they require to generate greater levels of adaptability and agility in the organization – such as inclusiveness, collaboration, or being more relationship focused. Yet the paradox is that the same complexity and stress that drives those needs can also undermine them. When you are feeling stressed or facing complexity you are more likely to be transactional rather than relational, to compete rather than collaborate, and to jump to black and white solutions rather than tolerating ambiguity.
- Compassion is a fundamental aspect of emotional agility, both for others and for yourself. Self-compassion is not about being weak, lazy, or dishonest with yourself. When you practice self-compassion you create psychological safety within yourself, so when you fail or are disappointed with what you do, you are able to show yourself kindness and ultimately become more motivated, less lazy, and more honest with yourself.

What Can You Try?

Susan shares the four core aspects of emotional agility:

- **Showing up** - be open to experiencing the full range of your emotions without judgment. Use them as data without letting them call the shots. As sometimes you'll recognize things in yourself, your relationships, in others or in your workplace that are uncomfortable, this can take courage, curiosity and compassion. As a leader rather than pushing aside difficulties, or asking your people if they are with you or against you when you're introducing changes, listening to people's concerns without labelling them as a "negative person" recognizes the reality of emotion complexity, and can help you move in the direction of positive change more effectively.
- **Stepping out** - create distance between you and your emotions to help shift your perspective. When you say things like, "I am sad," "I am anxious," or "I am angry" you can be over identifying with the emotions - you become the emotion. However, you are a person with intentions, values, things that are important, and your emotions are just emotions. So instead of saying "I am sad," say "I'm noticing that I'm feeling sad". Try to label your emotions as accurately as possible. For example, when you describe 'stress' in a more nuanced way, you can better understand the causes, what you need to do about them, and research shows that this activates the readiness potential in your brain that can help you start setting goals.
- **Walking your Why** – bring your values front and center, and take action towards them. Values can often be seen as abstract ideas in organizations; however, you can think of values as qualities of action – so you can move in the direction of your values or away from your values. For example, if you value fairness, do you choose to have the difficult conversation or do you choose to avoid it? And if you value fairness, how fair is avoiding it - to the team, to the individual, or to yourself?
- **Moving on** - research has found that the most effective way to make change is through tiny tweaks rather than taking large-scale action. It is critical that these are value aligned tweaks, that connect with who you want to be – in your life, as a leader or in the workplace. One way to create new habits is piggybacking what you want to create onto an existing habit. For example, if connection is one of your values, if you always put your keys in the drawer when you arrive home, put your mobile phone in there as well and connect better with your loved ones.

Where Might You Start?

How might you align your values more with the actions you take every day?

Want To Learn More?

- Check out [Susan's webpage](#)
- Watch Susan's [TedTalk, The Grit and Power of Emotional Courage](#)
- Take the [Emotional Agility Assessment Quiz](#)

Join us in the conversation at the [Making Positive Psychology Work Facebook page](#) to hear more from Susan and other listeners on increasing emotional agility.