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The Tyranny of Relentless Positivity

When we ignore difficult emotions, they end up controlling us. Here's how embracing emotional agility allows us to deal with the world as it is.

BY [MINDFUL STAFF](#) | FEBRUARY 2, 2018 | [WELL-BEING](#)



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We are caught up in a rigid culture that values relentless positivity over emotional agility, true resilience, and thriving, says Susan David, Ph.D., a Psychologist on the faculty of Harvard Medical School and author of the book *Emotional Agility*. And when we push aside difficult emotions in order to embrace false positivity, we lose our capacity to develop deep skills to help us deal with the world as it is, not as we wish it to be. In this [TED Talk](#), Dr. David explores why tough emotions are essential for living a life of true meaning and, yes, even happiness.

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Susan David
The gift and power of emotional courage

Susan David, Ph.D.: “In South Africa, where I come from, “sawubona” is the Zulu word for “hello.” There’s a beautiful and powerful intention behind the word because “sawubona” literally translated means, “I see you, and by seeing you, I bring you into being.” So beautiful, imagine being greeted like that. But what does it take in the way we see ourselves? Our thoughts, our emotions and our stories that help us to thrive in an increasingly complex and fraught world?

This crucial question has been at the center of my life’s work. Because how we deal with our inner world drives everything. Every aspect of how we love, how we live, how we parent and how we lead. The conventional view of emotions as good or bad, positive or negative, is rigid. And rigidity in the face of complexity is toxic. We need greater levels of emotional agility for true resilience and thriving.

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My journey with this calling began not in the hallowed halls of a university, but in the messy, tender business of life. I grew up in the white suburbs of apartheid South Africa, a country and community committed to not seeing. To denial. It’s denial that makes 50 years of racist legislation possible while people convince themselves that they are doing nothing wrong. And yet, I first learned of the destructive power of

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My father died on a Friday. He was 42 years old and I was 13. My mother whispered to me to go and say goodbye to my father before I went to school. So I put my backpack down and walked the passage that ran through to where the heart of our home my father lay dying of cancer. His eyes were closed, but he knew I was there. In his presence, I had always felt seen. I told him I loved him, said goodbye and headed off for my day. At school, I drifted from science to mathematics to history to biology, as my father slipped from the world. From May to July to September to November, I went about with my usual smile. I didn't drop a single grade. When asked how I was doing, I would shrug and say, "OK." I was praised for being strong. I was the master of being OK.

But back home, we struggled—my father hadn't been able to keep his small business going during his illness. And my mother, alone, was grieving the love of her life trying to raise three children, and the creditors were knocking. We felt, as a family, financially and emotionally ravaged. And I began to spiral down, isolated, fast. I started to use food to numb my pain. Binging and purging. Refusing to accept the full weight of my grief. No one knew, and in a culture that values relentless positivity, I thought that no one wanted to know.

Moving Beyond Emotional Rigidity

But one person did not buy into my story of triumph over grief. My eighth-grade English teacher fixed me with burning blue eyes as she handed out blank notebooks. She said, "Write what you're feeling. Tell the truth. Write like nobody's reading." And just like that, I was invited to show up authentically to my grief and pain. It was a simple act but nothing short of a revolution for me. It was this revolution that started in this blank notebook 30 years ago that shaped my life's work. The secret, silent correspondence with myself. Like a gymnast, I started to move beyond the rigidity of denial into what I've now come to call emotional agility.

Life's beauty is inseparable from its fragility: We are young until we are not. We walk down the streets sexy until one day we realize that we are unseen. We nag our children and one day realize that there is silence where that child once was, now making his or her way in the world. We are healthy until a diagnosis brings us to our knees. The only certainty is uncertainty, and yet we are not navigating this frailty successfully or sustainably. The World Health Organization tells us that depression is now the single leading cause of disability globally—outstripping cancer, outstripping heart disease. And at a time of greater complexity, unprecedented technological,

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On the one hand, we might obsessively brood on our feelings, getting stuck inside our heads, hooked on being right, or victimized by our news feed. On the other, we might bottle our emotions, pushing them aside and permitting only those emotions deemed legitimate.

In a survey I recently conducted with over 70,000 people, I found that a third of us—a third—either judge ourselves for having so-called “bad emotions,” like sadness, anger or even grief. Or actively try to push aside these feelings. We do this not only to ourselves, but also to people we love, like our children—we may inadvertently shame them out of emotions seen as negative, jump to a solution, and fail to help them to see these emotions as inherently valuable.

The Tyranny of Relentless Positivity

Normal, natural emotions are now seen as good or bad. And being positive has become a new form of moral correctness. People with cancer are automatically told to just stay positive. Women, to stop being so angry. And the list goes on. It’s a tyranny. It’s a tyranny of positivity. And it’s cruel. Unkind. And ineffective. And we do it to ourselves, and we do it to others.

If there’s one common feature of brooding, bottling, or false positivity, it’s this: they are all rigid responses. And if there’s a single lesson we can learn from the inevitable fall of apartheid, it is that rigid denial doesn’t work. It’s unsustainable. For individuals, for families, for societies. And as we watch the ice caps melt, it is unsustainable for our planet.

But when we push aside normal emotions to embrace false positivity, we lose our capacity to develop skills to deal with the world as it is, not as we wish it to be.

Research on emotional suppression shows that when emotions are pushed aside or ignored, they get stronger. Psychologists call this amplification. Like that delicious chocolate cake in the refrigerator, the more you try to ignore it, the greater its hold on you. You might think you’re in control of unwanted emotions when you ignore them, but in fact, they control you. Internal pain always comes out. Always. And who pays the price? We do. Our children, our colleagues, our communities.

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we wish it to be. I've had hundreds of people tell me what they don't want to feel. They say things like, "I don't want to try because I don't want to feel disappointed." Or, "I just want this feeling to go away."

"I understand," I say to them. "But you have dead people's goals." Only dead people never get unwanted or inconvenienced by their feelings.

Only dead people never get stressed, never get broken hearts, never experience the disappointment that comes with failure. Tough emotions are part of our contract with life. You don't get to have a meaningful career or raise a family or leave the world a better place without stress and discomfort. Discomfort is the price of admission to a meaningful life.

So, how do we begin to dismantle rigidity and embrace emotional agility? As that young schoolgirl, when I leaned into those blank pages, I started to do away with feelings of what I should be experiencing. And instead started to open my heart to what I did feel. Pain. And grief. And loss. And regret.

How to Embrace Emotional Agility

Research now shows that the radical acceptance of all of our emotions—even the messy, difficult ones—is the cornerstone to resilience, thriving, and true, authentic happiness. But emotional agility is more than just an acceptance of emotions, we also know that accuracy matters. In my own research, I found that words are essential. We often use quick and easy labels to describe our feelings. "I'm stressed" is the most common one I hear. But there's a world of difference between stress and disappointment or stress and that knowing-dread of "I'm in the wrong career." When we label our emotions accurately, we are more able to discern the precise cause of our feelings. And what scientists call the "readiness potential" in our brain is activated, allowing us to take concrete steps. But not just any steps, the right steps for us. Because our emotions are data. Our emotions contain flashing lights to things that we care about.

We tend not to feel strong emotion to stuff that doesn't mean anything in our worlds. If you feel rage when you read the news, that rage is a signpost, perhaps, that you value equity and fairness—and an opportunity to take active steps to shape your life in that direction. When we are open to the difficult emotions, we are able to generate responses that are values-aligned.

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endorse his idea that he gets to give her away to the first stranger he sees in a shopping mall.

We own our emotions, they don't own us. When we internalize the difference between how I feel in all my wisdom, and what I do in a values-aligned action, we generate the pathway to our best selves via our emotions. So, what does this look like in practice?

1. When you feel a strong, tough emotion, don't race for the emotional exits. Learn its contours, show up to the journal of your hearts.
2. What is the emotion telling you? And try not to say "I am," as in, "I'm angry" or "I'm sad." When you say "I am" it makes you sound as if you are the emotion. Whereas you are you, and the emotion is a data source. Instead, try to notice the feeling for what it is: "I'm noticing that I'm feeling sad" or "I'm noticing that I'm feeling angry."

These are essential skills for us, our families, our communities. They're also critical to the workplace.

In my research, when I looked at what helps people to bring the best of themselves to work, I found a powerful key contributor: individualized consideration. When people are allowed to feel their emotional truth, engagement, creativity, and innovation flourish in the organization. Diversity isn't just people, it's also what's inside people, including diversity of emotion. The most agile, resilient individuals, teams, organizations, families, communities are built on an openness to the normal human emotions. It's this that allows us to say, "*What is my emotion telling me?*" "*Which action will bring me towards my values?*" "*Which will take me away from my values?*" Emotional agility is the ability to be with your emotions with curiosity, compassion, and especially the courage to take values-connected steps.

Emotional agility is the ability to be with your emotions with curiosity, compassion, and especially the courage to take values-connected steps.

When I was little, I would wake up at night terrified by the idea of death. My father would comfort me with soft pats and kisses. But he would never lie. "We all die, Susie," he would say. "It's normal to be scared." He didn't try to invent a buffer

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gone. And that time for each of us is all too precious and all too brief. But when our moment comes to face our fragility, in that ultimate time, it will ask us, “*Are you agile?*” “*Are you agile?*” Let the moment be an unreserved “yes.” A “yes” born of a lifelong correspondence with your own heart. And in seeing yourself. Because in seeing yourself, you are also able to see others, too: the only sustainable way forward in a fragile, beautiful world. Sawubona.”

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