

Regain Control in an Unpredictable World

Susan David: Hi everyone. Well, when we spoke last week, I mentioned how my husband and I had gone from exchanging Post-it notes of what groceries need to be collected into now exchanging emergency contact information. In these coronavirus times, as you all know, a lot can happen in a week. My husband's now packing his bag, ready to sleep in his laboratory for the next month as he goes and sees patients at the MGH, and we have the recognition that he likely won't be able to come home for fear of infecting me and the children. As might be expected, this has thrown a lot of my routines and my expectations into disarray. The virus pandemic has disrupted lives and routines around the world, often leading us to feel that we are stuck in a "new normal"—one that is not about choosing and one that we have no control over. So how do we regain our foothold when it feels like everything is up in the air? This is Checking In with Susan David.

Today is about regaining your power. Your foothold, your sense of agency. And to do this there are two key ideas that I want to focus on. First is getting unstuck mentally, from thoughts, emotions and narratives that may be imprisoning us—all of us—in pessimism or disempowerment. The second is getting unstuck in our behaviors: creating small pockets of control that we can then build on. Getting unstuck in these two ways, mentally and behaviorally, will help all of us to regenerate, to care for those who need us, and to respond effectively to the situation at hand. These are things we all need a little bit more of right now, myself included.

So first, getting unstuck mentally. We need stories to make sense of our lives. They help us to organize our experiences and stay grounded. But not all stories produce this result. We can often, as human beings, climb into stories. Some of our stories were written on our mental chalkboards in grade three about who we are, what we are good at, and what kind of life we even deserve. And as we're finding, as the virus causes our routines to crumble and forces us to rearrange ourselves: the stories that hook us can prove especially destructive. Amidst the uncertainty of the past few weeks, you might have noticed yourself rigidly clinging to your old stories. Maybe you've created a story, a belief, that you need uninterrupted long hours and blocks of time to get your work accomplished and have decided now that it will be impossible to get anything done with the kids at home all day. Or maybe you've convinced yourself that the close quarters of a kickboxing ring is the only place that you can let off steam and clear your head, and that social distancing has condemned you to months of simmering frustration and inactivity. Whatever story you're hooked on, it's likely going to make it harder for you to regain your foothold and adapt to your temporary new reality. Because of this, it becomes critically important to unhook ourselves from stories that might be trapping us, causing us to be frustrated or even self-defeating. When we're stuck in a

thought, an emotional story, we are seeing the world from that perspective. We are immersed in it, and we see it as being reality. So one of the ways that we can start to unhook ourselves—to get unstuck—is to change our perspective and start loosening the grip that the story might have on us. I'm going to share some proven techniques that can help us to take this view, to move ourselves beyond being stuck in a story to what we call the metaview: being able to step out of the story because it isn't serving us and who we want to be, right now, in this current context.

In Zen Buddhism, it's common practice to contemplate paradoxes like, "What is the sound of one hand clapping?" There are probably paradoxes from your own life right now that you could chew on in a Zen-like fashion. Maybe you just adore your children, but now that you're spending every moment with them, they're driving you absolutely bonkers. Perhaps you've fled a coronavirus hotspot and you feel at once relieved to escape and guilty about your privilege. Or you may relish the independence that having your own business gives you but are now staring into canceled contracts without outside support. Give yourself time to dig into the paradoxes created in your own life as a result of the virus. Psychologically, this is really important. Instead of denying reality or getting stuck in it, embracing and accepting the seeming contradictions will help you to process them, to problem solve, and to move forward in healthy ways.

The second strategy is simply to have a laugh. Humor is an excellent way to step out of and unhook from narratives that are not serving us. And as long as you aren't using humor to deny or to mask genuine pain, finding something funny about the present circumstances can help you to accept them and then create healthy distance from them. I sometimes do this, thinking that if there were beings in another part of space looking down on us at Earth, they would be observing with interest and curiosity all that is unfolding in our little world. So if your cat rushes across your keyboard in the middle of an intense work call or you find yourself telling your children to go potty while you're off mute, give yourself permission to laugh about it. After all, we're all in this differently, but together.

Another strategy is to change your point of view. Changing a point of view is one of the most critical ways that we can start getting unstuck. I've seen this in the work that I do with clients. Frequently people will describe how they simply have no way forward when it comes to a particular situation. It might be a job that they feel bored in or a relationship that's not working out. I might ask that person, "What do you see as options here? What strategies might you use?" And the person might say, "Nothing. I don't have options. I don't have strategies. That's why I'm talking to you." And then I do something that is well known in psychology: help the person to change their point of view. I might say to them, "I see that you feel stuck, and that you have no options. Imagine, for a moment, that we bring the wisest, most loving and kind person that you know into this room with you now. You tell the person your problem. And the person offers a perspective, one that you hadn't thought about. What might that perspective be?" What is so fascinating is that this individual who, one moment had been saying that they had no options, might now, when they're seeing a perspective from a different person—someone who's loving, kind, and wise—have many options to suggest. What this psychological strategy is doing is, it's basically moving someone out of the perspective of being immersed in their story, their way of

being stuck, into an alternative view. And this is something that we can use in our own lives right now.

Of course, one way we embody our narratives, our stories about ourselves, is through behaviors, what we do every single day: our routines. What happens when those routines get up-ended? Why are routines and habits so important, especially now? Habits, specifically, those that are grounded in our values, like health, connection, and community, are foundational to our wellbeing. They keep us exercising, having special time with our family, and calling our mom on good days and bad, when we're paying attention and when we're not. No matter how frazzled we are in the morning, we always remember to brush our teeth and to fasten our seatbelts as soon as we get in the car. Habits also make our good intentions durable, so that our mental resources are freed up for other tasks and opportunities. When our key routines and habits are pulled out from under us, we can become destabilized. And this becomes even more the case when complexity and loneliness enter the picture.

We now find ourselves in the world of uncertainty, not only with respect to the virus and the day to day lives that we might have taken for granted, but as a social species. We may even feel very cut off from our tribe, our extended family, or our beloved work colleagues. And even for modern human beings, this can feel life and death scary. Depending on who you are, your environment, your context, your routine might have been up-ended in a whole range of ways. You might be someone who's used to the structure of going to work, now finding yourself floundering aimlessly, wondering how to fill your time. Or you might simultaneously be trying to run Zoom calls and meetings, homeschool your three children, and put food on the table, without any time available to you. You might even fit into the third category: the warriors, the health care workers, the emergency services professionals, who have had their days going from eight hours to 16 hours and are wondering when this will ever end. For all of us, the experience can be incredibly destabilizing, that feeling of being ungrounded, of not knowing how to anchor oneself into the here and now, not being able to get a sense of agency and predictability over the current situation. When faced with this level of uncertainty, fear fills in the gaps. We begin catastrophizing, ruminating, lashing out, or getting stuck in patterns of avoidance or inside our heads. It's critical, then, for us to regain a sense of predictability so that we are anchored in the here and now. After all, it is the here and now that we need to respond to. We can't impact what isn't in our control. We cannot control the kids in the neighboring town who are defying social distancing and playing football. We cannot control the person living in a different state who buys more toilet paper than they need. And we cannot control what gets included in the speech of some or other politician. If we hold too much concern and too much focus on these uncontrollable aspects of our lives, we greatly increase our suffering. But what we can do is make tiny tweaks: create small pockets of predictability in our lives. When you think about these tiny tweaks, often a really good place to start is with sleep, diet, and exercise. The temptation to spend all day on the couch, feast on frozen pizza, and stay up late watching the next episode of Tiger King on Netflix is incredibly strong right now. When you're living in a context of self quarantine, that's the path of least resistance. But make a point to get proper rest, eat the occasional salad, take a run, a bike ride, or some other kind of physical activity that you can do while maintaining social distance. Our bodies and minds are profoundly intertwined.

And the better you take care of the former, the better equipped you'll be with the latter, and this will help you to adapt to new circumstances and regain your foothold. Psychological researcher and scientist Lisa Feldman Barrett talks about it in these terms: that when you get enough sleep, when you move your body, when you exercise effectively, what you're doing, in essence, is you're replenishing your budget, the budget of psychological and physiological resources that you then have available to you to address the reality of the circumstances at hand and the stresses that might be thrown at you.

So first, connect with a routine. If you normally get up at 7 am, see if you can keep getting up around that time. See if you can establish some sort of structure for your family, because the kids need it, too. Second, is to try to create some small habits, small changes that bring us closer to ourselves, to our values and our intent. But what's really important for all of us is this caveat: we are not running a marathon here. We are trying to enter a space into coping, into being effective, and to really resetting and connecting with ourselves, in the midst of chaos.

And so there's nothing wrong, inherently, in partaking in that extra chocolate every once in a while, or watching that TV program. But just understand, at some level, whether you are doing this as a default emotion regulation strategy. Is it something that you're using to help you to control the environment? Or are you doing it in a way that is a chosen intentional comfort? The latter can be really helpful. It can provide you space to process and to simply just be. You're not in charge of every decision that a politician makes or exactly what's going on in the hospitals right now. What we can do is we can decide what we can influence. And what we can influence tends to be our own behaviors, how we respond, and how we engage with the reality that's unfolding in front of us. To use the beautiful sentiment of one of my daughter Sophie's favorite books, Winnie the Pooh: "We are all of us braver than we believe, stronger than we seem, and smarter than we think."

As you go through the coming week, I hope that these tools help to get you unstuck and to regain your foothold, both mentally and in your behaviors. I hope they are helpful. I hope that they give you back your sense of power and agency in some small way. But what I wish for more than this is for all of us— that we go through the week with grace. Now is not the time for perfection. It's time for simple progress, whatever that means to you. It's not the time for iron will grit, but rather for grace. It's not the time for judgment but for compassion. And it's not the time for white-knuckled control, but rather having the wisdom and the courage to sometimes let go. That's all for today. If you enjoyed this episode of Checking In with Susan David, please subscribe, rate, and review the show or simply tell a friend who needs some extra support right now. We really appreciate it. Be well, stay safe, and let's check in next week.