

# Why Bad Emotions Are Good

**Susan David:** Sawubona, everyone. In South Africa, the country that 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.” But what does it take in the way we see ourselves, our difficult thoughts, emotions, and stories that help us to thrive in an increasingly complex and fraught world? This is Checking In with Susan David.

This week has been tough for so many. I got an email from a friend to say that she hides in her closet, nearly daily, crying. She just wants the frustration of what has become her life, the homeschooling and feeding and zoom calls, the frustration, she said, “I just need this to go away.” I got a note too from a healthcare worker who described how her main reason for going into healthcare was to help, and her sense of helplessness now, as she is on these front lines, and her sense of moral injury at not being able to do what she wants— to give these people assistance. And again, she said, “I just wish these feelings would go away.” But in truth, these feelings are part of our reality, and these feelings, even the most difficult ones, are what make us whole human beings.

Don’t worry. Be happy. Positive vibes only. Find all of those silver linings. Even as our lives and livelihoods are threatened by a global pandemic, our culture finds a way to tell us that our difficult emotions are unwelcomed and unproductive. But contrary to these messages, so-called “negative” emotions are normal, and accepting our less pleasurable emotions can have tangible and powerful benefits. The traditional view of our most difficult emotions, our sadness, our anger, our anxiety, and our grief, is that they are good or bad, positive or negative, but this view is rigid, and rigidity in the face of complexity is toxic.

We need greater levels of emotional agility, the ability to be with all of our emotions, for true resilience and for thriving. If you are experiencing fear and heartache in your day-to-day life right now, you’ll no doubt, see around you all the time on your social media feed admonishments to “find the silver lining.”

I see this as something of a tyranny. It’s a tyranny of positivity. It’s cruel, it’s unkind, and it’s ineffective. People with cancer, for instance, are automatically told to just stay positive. Individuals who have been marginalized and discriminated against, to stop being so angry. Contrary to what our culture tells us, these so-called “negative” feelings are normal. This is a fundamental fact. We are wired to feel negative at times. It’s simply part of the human condition. Society’s emphasis on being positive is just one more way that pathologizes the normal fluctuations of our emotions. I’ve Transcribed by been talking here about our culture, implores people to be positive, and of

course I recognize that every culture is different, and that really what I'm very much focusing on are cultures in which this idea of either forced positivity or just "keep calm and carry on," is so much bound into the way the culture exists. So many of us become hooked into the idea that happiness is supposedly the holy grail, and what happiness does is it leads us to ignore our difficult experiences, and therefore we aren't actually bringing ourselves into the fullness of what we are capable of to bear on the reality of those experiences. And because our culture doesn't support the ability for us to be whole with these difficult emotions, what we often do is we start engaging in hustling with them. We either bottle them, where we push them aside, we rationalize them, we suppress them, or we deny them, or we brood on them, where we get stuck in them and start treating them as fact.

Research is clear on this, that people who overly strongly strive towards happiness as a goal, over time, actually become less happy. There's a certain expectation that is a disappointment waiting to happen, and when people are overly focused on being happy, what they are very often doing is not living in the world as it is, rather they're living in the world as they wish it would be.

In my work, I often have people say things to me like, "I don't want to feel, I don't want to feel the stress. I don't want to feel anxiety, or I'm feeling really scared about the situation now, Susan, and I just wish this feeling would go away." And I get it, at such a deep level, I get it. I have my own sadness and fear. I'm facing into a situation where I know that it's likely that my husband will be on the COVID wards in the coming days, and this is tough, but when we wish away our difficult emotions, or when we wish that our difficult emotions simply didn't exist, these at a fundamental level are dead people's goals. Only dead people never get stressed. Only dead people never experienced hardship. Only dead people never experienced the disappointment that comes with failure.

Tough emotions are part of our contract with life. We don't get to have a meaningful career, to raise a family, to create change in the world, and leave it a better place without stress and discomfort. Discomfort, quite simply, is the price of admission to a meaningful life. So we want not to bottle or try to push away our difficult emotions, but we also want to be careful not to brood and get stuck in our difficult emotions, because when we get stuck in a difficulty emotions, those difficult emotions then are calling the shots. They are telling us, "you are sad. You don't want to get out of bed, and you then stay in bed. They're calling the shots. But we need to call the shots in our own lives. When we suppress or try to do away with our difficult emotions, this simply doesn't work. Psychologists call this amplification. It's like that delicious piece of chocolate cake in the refrigerator, the more you try not to think about it, the greater its hold on you. Simply put, feelings of fear, anxiety, boredom, and agitation are normal, healthy parts of our mental life. This is doubly true during times of crisis.

Though some people cope by tuning out the frightening realities, right now reality is frightening, and anyone who's unconcerned about the spread of COVID-19 probably isn't paying very close attention. So, if you're struggling with difficult emotions, you might be asking, "what's a good and healthy way for me to process these if they are detracting from my life?" When people are struggling with emotions, they often use strategies to deal with these, and it's helpful for us to

take a look at both short-term strategies and long-term strategies to see if you are using the ones that are more versus less effective, for instance, procrastination. At its heart, procrastination is a way that people use to deal with a situation that's difficult and uncomfortable. Procrastination is unhelpful because it often creates compounded problems. The work piles up, and now not only are you dealing with the work, but a stressful deadline and maybe even an angry boss. Another example of a short-term ineffective coping strategy is overeating, or alcohol, oversleeping, getting hooked into social media, basically anything that uses subtle avoidance and can lead to compounded problems, all go into the bucket of those coping strategies that can bring about more problems, in the longer term.

We can also use short-term coping strategies that are effective, getting enough sleep, engaging in self care, which is not the same as procrastination when it comes from a recognition of your values, that you are important, that you need to look after yourself, and it's an intentional choice that this is what you want to do right now. Exercise too, is one of the most effective short-term coping strategies that we know of. Of course, the best way to move forward in difficult circumstances are to think beyond short-term coping strategies to the long-term. In general, the litmus for an effective long-term strategy is this, number one, is it active? And number two, is it directed at the issue itself? It's when you move out of your head and into your life, into actually doing something, even if that something makes you feel uncomfortable, that will give you agency and power. So whether it's getting your resume together or making that difficult call, these active direct strategies are key.

Last, a gentle reminder that you don't need to go it alone. In fact, you shouldn't go it alone. There's an enormous amount of grace and dignity in showing up to your need for help, whether that's provided by a colleague, a friend, a therapist, or even a lifeline call center, you are not alone. Please know that.

We also know that our more difficult emotions actually help us with different types of thinking. You've all had this experience, you might go for a walk and you're feeling in a happy, relaxed mood. What we know is that this mood engages creative, brainstorming, "it'll be all right" kind of orientation that we all love to feel.

But we also know the experience of feeling down, feeling a bit sad, and what these emotions do is they engage a different type of thinking style, that critical, editing, proofreading, contingency planning, "what could go wrong here" type of orientation, and this is really powerful because when we are, for example, trying to create or come up with a business plan or trying to think about what could be a fun way of engaging with our team, yes, positive emotions can be really helpful. But when we're trying to understand our budget, our finances, whether we're going to have enough money to make it through the rest of the month and whether we should make some kind of contingency plan, our "negative" emotions, so-called again, actually help us to do this kind of thinking.

So what we start to see is that these difficult emotions, while they are often unpleasurable, have a

very, very powerful effect on helping us to have a complete picture, a complete sense of how to find our way forward. So in order for us to be whole, creative, productive, and effective human beings, we can't only be in the space where we look for silver linings or where we try just to be happy. We actually need to open ourselves to the reality of the work that the more difficult emotions actually helps us to do. So how do we move into the space then of allowing these difficult emotions to play their powerful part? Rebecca Solnit, in her book, *Hope In The Dark*, describes this, "inside the word emergency, is the word emerge. From an emergency new things come forth. The old certainties are crumbling fast, but danger and possibility are sisters." Our movement towards a better life in the here and now, in the current context of your current reality begins with showing up. When we show up simply, fully, with acceptance, even the worst demons usually back down. Simply by facing into the scary things, the difficult things that your emotions might be signaling to you, and by giving them a name, we often struck them of their power. We end the tug of war by dropping the rope. Decades of psychological research shows that our life satisfaction, in the face of inevitable worries, regrets and sad experiences, as so many of us are having right now, depends not so much on how many of these things we experience or even their intensity, but rather on the way we deal with them. Do we bottle, pushing away these difficult experiences, or do we brood, allowing them to govern our behavior, or do we do what is most healthy, showing up to them compassionately with curiosity and acceptance?

The second powerful way that we can be with our difficult thoughts, emotions, and experiences, but not let them hold us, not let them hook us, or drive our actions, is by also just making the choice of what to let go of. What we let go of in times of COVID-19 are going to be different for different people. For some, it might be letting go of the expectation of what is normal. Sometimes you're going to let go of a past experience that's difficult and that you've been unforgiving about, but that actually letting go of will be helpful to you right now. Sometimes it's going to mean forgiving others in the here and now, recognizing that we are all doing the best we can in abnormal circumstances.

Sometimes letting go means forgiving yourself. Just saying the word, "let go, let go," is enough to bring a sense of hope and relief, but those same words, "let go," can also cause anxiety that we will be left with nothing, that we will have resigned ourselves to a hopeless situation. In truth though, when we let go of one thing, that one thing that is keeping us tight, keeping us bound to expectations and creating a prison around us, we are left with everything else.

What I would encourage you to do with your difficult emotions, instead of resisting them is to do the opposite, the unexpected in a world that always thinks that we need to do something. And it's this, do nothing. Don't try to do away with, rather try to be awake to. Be awake to the care, the loss, the openness, the confusion, the overwhelm. To make decisions that match up with the way you hope to live going forward, you have to be open to the things that matter to you now so that you can use them as signposts. This is not about passive resignation. It's not about saying, "this is the way I feel, and there's nothing I can do about it." It's simply an openness to the emotions as they are.

We are big enough to have all of our emotions. Recognizing that we can often, when we are stuck in our difficult emotions, we can often become the cloud, "I am sad. I am angry. I am upset, but in fact, we are not the cloud. We are the sky." That's all for today. Be well, stay safe and let's check in next week. Sawubona.