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**#1 Wall Street Journal Best Seller**  
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*The counterintuitive approach to achieving your true potential, heralded by the Harvard Business Review as a groundbreaking idea of the year*

# EMOTIONAL AGILITY

**Get Unstuck, Embrace Change, and Thrive in Work and Life**  
**By Susan David, Ph.D.**

The way we navigate our inner world – our everyday thoughts, emotions, and self-stories – is *the* single most important determinant of our life success. It drives our actions, careers, relationships, happiness, health; everything. For example: Do we let our self-doubts, failings, shame, fear, or anger hold us back? Can we be determined, persevering toward key life goals, but just as importantly, have the insight and courage to recognize when these goals are not serving us, and adapt?

In **EMOTIONAL AGILITY: Get Unstuck, Embrace Change, and Thrive in Work and Life (Avery, On sale September 2016, Hardcover & Ebook)**, Susan David, Ph.D. a renowned psychologist and expert on emotions, happiness, and achievement, draws on her more than twenty years of research to show that emotionally agile people are not immune to stresses and setbacks. The key difference is they know how to gain critical insight about situations and interactions from their feelings, and use this knowledge to adapt, align their values and actions, and make changes to bring the best of themselves forward.

Emotional agility is a process that enables us to navigate life's twists and turns with self-acceptance, clear-sightedness, and an open mind. The process isn't about ignoring difficult emotions and thoughts. It's about holding those emotions and thoughts loosely, facing them courageously and compassionately, and then moving past them to ignite change in your life.





In **EMOTIONAL AGILITY**, Dr. David shares four key concepts:

- **Showing Up:** Instead of ignoring difficult thoughts and emotions or overemphasizing ‘positive thinking’, facing into your thoughts, emotions and behaviors willingly, with curiosity and kindness.
- **Stepping Out:** Detaching from, and observing your thoughts and emotions to see them for what they are—just thoughts, just emotions. Essentially, learning to see yourself as the chessboard, filled with possibilities, rather than as any one piece on the board, confined to certain preordained moves.
- **Walking Your Why:** Your core values provide the compass that keeps you moving in the right direction. Rather than being abstract ideas, these values are the true path to willpower, resilience and effectiveness.
- **Moving On:** Small deliberate tweaks to your mindset, motivation, and habits – in ways that are infused with your values, can make a powerful difference in your life. The idea is to find the balance between challenge and competence, so that you’re neither complacent nor overwhelmed. You’re excited, enthusiastic, invigorated.

Drawing on her deep research, decades of expert consulting, and her own experience overcoming adversity after losing her father at a young age, Dr. David shows how anyone can thrive in an uncertain world by becoming more emotionally agile. Written with authority, wit, and empathy, **EMOTIONAL AGILITY** serves as a roadmap for real behavioral change -- a new way of acting that will help you to reincorporate your most troubling feelings as a source of energy and creativity, and live the life you want. **EMOTIONAL AGILITY** will help you live your most successful life whoever you are and whatever you face.

**EMOTIONAL AGILITY**  
**Get Unstuck, Embrace Change, and Thrive in Work and Life**  
**By Susan David**  
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**About the Author:** Susan David, Ph.D., is a psychologist on the faculty of Harvard Medical School; cofounder and codirector of the Institute of Coaching at McLean Hospital; and CEO of Evidence Based Psychology, a boutique business consultancy. An in-demand speaker and advisor, David has worked with the senior leadership of hundreds of major organizations, including the United Nations, Ernst & Young, and the World Economic Forum. Her work has been featured in numerous publications, including *Harvard Business Review*, *Time*, *Fast Company*, and *The Wall Street Journal*. Originally from South Africa, she lives outside of Boston with her family.



**A Conversation with Susan David: author of  
EMOTIONAL AGILITY:  
Get Unstuck, Embrace Change, and Thrive in Work and Life**

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**Q) What is emotional agility and why is it essential?**

Emotional Agility is an innovative approach to navigating life's twists and turns with insight and according to our values, rather than via our knee-jerk "hooks" in which our thoughts, emotions or stories drive our behavior.

Emotional Agility is the ability to accept and notice your inner world – your thoughts, emotions and stories – viewing even the most powerful ones with compassion and curiosity. Instead of these holding you hostage, shrinking your life and clouding your interactions, you're able to get a clear reading of the present circumstances, while responding in alignment with your values and purpose. Emotional Agility enables us to cultivate real change in our habits, relationships and wellbeing, at work and at home.

**Q) What is wrong with today's increasingly popular happiness movement?**

To be clear, I am not 'anti-happiness'. Happiness is associated with a lot of positive outcomes for us in both our personal and professional lives. But what gets lost in the well-intentioned message to "be happier," is that being *unhappy* sometimes is an authentic human experience. The pressure to feel happy can cause people to struggle with themselves and their *naturally* occurring difficult thoughts and feelings ("I shouldn't feel sad") and to push them aside. We end up disregarding that we feel upset, or angry, and we ignore the root causes of our emotions. Paradoxically, that leads to greater unhappiness in the long run, and makes people feel like happiness failures to boot.

While unpleasant emotions are, well, unpleasant, they are often beacons of values that are important to us. A sense of disaffection or dissatisfaction or concern is your inner self telling you

that you are moving away from something of value to you. No one wants to feel disaffected, but to deny and push aside this type of emotion in the service of positivity means you're choosing not to learn something important.



**Q) In Emotional Agility you talk about ‘getting hooked’. What does this mean.**

Every single day we have tens of thousands of inner experiences, many of them unpleasant. We have thoughts: “I’m not good enough. I’m struggling with this. My boss is undermining me.” We have emotions: anger, disappointment, concern, sadness. And we have stories “I’m not cut out for this career”, or “I would do this if only the circumstances were right.” When we’re hooked, we let these thoughts, emotions and stories call the shots, rather than what is truly of value to us. Emotional Agility, on the other hand, understands that it is not the fact of these inner experiences (we all have them) but how we deal with them that is the biggest predictor of our success and our effectiveness in every aspect of our lives, from parenting to work, and all of our relationships.

**Q: But isn’t it counterproductive to engage in negative emotions or thoughts?**

No, quite the opposite. Human emotions – even the most difficult ones – are normal. Yet the dominant view in our culture is that we should ‘be happier’, ‘choose happiness’ and ‘think positive’. When we ignore our emotions—particularly difficult ones such as anger or sadness—we are cutting off a key piece of data that can help us figure out what our values are, and what choices to make to act in our own best interest. Emotions help us communicate with other people as well as ourselves. They act as critical messengers, and when we shut down, or ignore our emotions we are doing ourselves a great disservice.

Emotions communicate information, though, not directions. This to say, just because we feel angry, doesn’t mean we have “the right” to be angry, that we are righteous in our anger and so should act on that anger. But we should not push our anger aside and pretend everything is great, either. What we need to do is acknowledge our feelings, receive them compassionately and curiously, and then rather than simply react, to instead delay the response so as to better understand our emotions. This process allows us to let our values drive our actions rather than our emotions and thoughts. It’s when people start treating their thoughts (“I’m gonna sound like an idiot”) as fact (“...so there’s no point in contributing to the meeting,”) that they get themselves into difficulties.

**Q) How can labeling our emotions impact us?**

Finding a label for emotions can be transformative; it can reduce painful, murky, and oceanic feelings of distress to a finite experience with boundaries and a name. Words have enormous power. If we cannot accurately label what we are feeling it becomes difficult to communicate well enough to get the support we need or to problem solve effectively. There is a huge difference between stress and anger, or stress and disappointment, or stress and anxiety, for example, and trouble with labeling emotions is often associated with poor mental health, dissatisfaction in jobs and relationships, and plenty of other ills.



**Q) How do women and men react differently to their emotions?**

I don't like to overplay these statistical gender differences because people respond to their emotions in unique ways. However, research shows that men are more likely to bottle their emotions, while women are more likely to brood on their emotions. Bottlers push emotions to the side and focus on getting on with their lives because those feelings are uncomfortable, or distracting, or because they believe that anything less than bright and chipper is a sign of weakness. "Think positive," "forge forward," and "get on with it," many men tell themselves. But of course they pop back up, usually with surprising and inappropriate intensity.

In contrast, brooders stew in their difficult and uncomfortable feelings, endlessly stirring the pot. They obsess over a hurt, a perceived failure, a shortcoming, or an anxiety. Brooders lose perspective as molehills become mountains and slights become capital crimes.

Although on the surface bottling and brooding look so different, both are associated with lower levels of resilience, problem-solving, relationship quality and health.

**Q) What does it mean to be on emotional autopilot and how can we refrain from this?**

Many people, much of the time, operate on emotional autopilot, reacting to situations without true awareness or even real volition. At work or at home, you might say something sarcastic, or shut down and avoid certain feelings, or procrastinate, walk away, or brood, or pitch a screaming fit, without even thinking about whether these responses are helpful. When you automatically respond in whatever unhelpful way you do, you're hooked. Emotional Agility on the other hand, allows you to notice your uncomfortable feelings and thoughts rather than be entangled in them. For example, when you're mindful of your anger, you can observe it with greater sensitivity, focus, and emotional clarity, perhaps discovering where the anger is actually coming from. You might even discover that your "anger" is really sadness or fear.

**Q) What's the good news about bad moods?**

Bad moods help us form arguments, improve memory, encourage perseverance, make us more polite and attentive, encourage generosity, and make us less prone to confirmation bias. Our raw feelings can teach us things about ourselves and can prompt insights into important life directions. For instance, a client came to me with an "anger problem." The two of us worked together to examine his feelings and sort them out. He realized that maybe he did not have an anger problem so much as he had a wife who was placing nearly impossible demands on him. By accepting and understanding his difficult emotions, rather than trying to suppress or fix them, he began to improve his marriage, not by remaking himself into milquetoast, but by learning to set better boundaries for what was acceptable behavior.



### **Q) How can parents raise emotionally agile children?**

Emotional agility is critical to children's ability to be resilient and adaptable to the future they will face. Children are only able to learn to be skilled with the emotions that will inevitably come their way if they get to practice with them. Often, in our well-intentioned rush to save our children pain, we grab away these learning opportunities.

For instance, your child comes home from school and is upset because no one would play with them. As a parent, *your* heart is in pain and *you* are saddened by their experience, too. So often, and with the best of intentions, we try to solve our children's problems rather than letting them feel pain. We might say things like, "No one will play with you at school? I am so sorry. I will

play with you. Why don't we go bake cupcakes together?" You may be trying to distract them from their sadness and show them that they are loved, but that kind of interaction encourages our children to gloss over their emotional experience.

Instead, parents might want to help children develop language around emotions, so they can see them for what they are and learn to rise above them. The first step is teaching them to label their emotions. We might say, "I can see you are really sad about this." Then help the child figure out what actions of theirs will help them move through the sadness. You might ask, "What do you think would help you in this situation? Do you want time to yourself? Should we go for a walk together?" In handling their sadness in this way, they learn critically that: emotions pass; that a difficult emotion won't kill them and that they are 'bigger' than their emotion. They learn to make themselves feel better when you're not nearby to "fix" it for them.

### **Q) What is the science behind values and their power to boost willpower and change habits?**

Values driven goals (or *want-to* goals) are critical to boosting willpower and changing our habits. In fact, they alter the 'physics' and likely success of any change we want to make to our lives.

There are, in general, two types of goals: have-to goals and want-to goals. *Have-to* goals are imposed often by a nagging friend or relative, or by your own sense of obligation to some internal narrative or external goal, typically related to avoiding shame. *Want-to* goals reflect a person's genuine interest and values. They are driven intrinsically and meaningfully by what is in the heart.

Want-motivation is associated with lower automatic attraction towards stimuli that are going to trip you up-- the old flame, chocolate cake-- and instead draws you toward behaviors that can help you achieve your goals. In contrast, have-to motivation ramps up temptation because it makes you feel constricted or deprived. In this way, pursuing a goal for have-to reasons can make you more vulnerable to doing what you supposedly do not want to do.



**Q) The concept of Emotional Agility was named a ‘Management Idea of the Year’ by the Harvard Business Review. It was also named the Thinkers50 Breakthrough Idea for the idea which has the potential to forever change how we think about business. Why is Emotional Agility so important in organizations?**

Organizations today are faced with unprecedented complexity that is driven by competition, globalization and technology. With this comes the need to be agile; to adapt and flourish in changing circumstances. But organizations will never be truly agile, unless the people who work within them are agile – emotionally agile.

Ironically, the very qualities that are needed in complex contexts are undermined by that same complexity. So instead of being tolerant of ambiguity, clear-headed, relationship oriented,

collaborative, and innovative, complexity drives the opposite. Employees are more likely to become transactional, make rash decisions, shut down, and feel stress, panic and guilt. Emotional agility is a necessary skill in enabling both the organization and its people to thrive.

**Q) Why do we need to update our career narratives, not just our resumes?**

At work, especially when things get intense, we too often fall back on our old stories about who we believe ourselves to be. These dusty old narratives can really hook us at critical moments, such as when we get (or need to give) negative feedback, or when we feel pressured to take on more work or to work faster, or when we must deal with supervisors or coworkers with stronger personalities, or when we feel unappreciated, or when our work-life balance is out of whack. To advance in our careers, we need to update these narratives the same way we update our résumés. And just as we no longer list our summer jobs once we’re out of college, some stuff from way back simply needs to be left behind.

**Q) You’ve developed an Emotional Agility quiz. How do our readers/listeners access this?**

Yes, over 60,000 people have taken this free, 5-minute assessment. The answers are analyzed and respondents receive a 10-page personalized report that describes their various Emotional Agility strengths and development areas. Anyone who is interested can access the free quiz at: <http://www.susandavid.com/learn>



**Q) What life events led you to become a researcher of emotions?**

I grew up in apartheid South Africa, a period that was filled with trauma and chaos. At that time, most South African's had a statistically higher chance of being raped than of learning how to read. From a very early age I became interested in how people were dealing (or not dealing) with the cruelty around them. Then, when I was 16 years old, my father was diagnosed with terminal cancer and told he had months to live.

The experience was traumatic and isolating for me. I didn't have many adults to confide in, and none of my peers had gone through anything similar and didn't really know how to navigate it. They, for example, stopped mentioning the word 'father' in my presence, thinking it might upset me. While it was well-intentioned, it was obvious that there was a huge amount of avoidance happening.

On the other hand, I had this incredible teacher. Over the course of my father's illness she encouraged her students to keep journals. I started to write about my experience with my father, and my regrets, my pain, my sense of loss. She in turn responded by writing heartfelt comments and questions. It was this beautiful experience, because I would go to school each day and have my lessons, as usual, but at night I had this secret, silent correspondence with this wonderful lady.

The journaling helped me confront my emotion, feel the pain, and to come out of it at the other end realizing that the writing had changed me. At a fundamental level it had helped me to process my father's death and grow through it.

That one experience – suffering a personal loss against the backdrop of country that was dealing with loss every day, encouraged me to think about how the way we are often told to deal with difficulties in our lives ('think positive', 'be happy', be gritty and forge forward) is entirely at odds with what is truly helpful. It gave me insight, and became the motivation of my entire career.





**Q) What are the first steps anyone can take to start becoming more emotionally agile?**

There are four main steps we can take to start becoming more emotionally agile. The first is to show up to your emotions--to face our thoughts, emotions, and behaviors willingly, with curiosity and kindness. Some of these are valid and appropriate to the moment. Others are old bits stuck in your psyche. In either case, whether they are accurate reflections of reality, or harmful distortions, these thoughts and emotions are a part of who we are, and we can learn to work with them and move on.

The next element is detaching from and observing our emotions and thoughts for what they are--just emotions and thoughts. This is referred to as stepping out. If we can step out from our emotions and thoughts we can create an open and non-judgmental space between our feelings and how we respond to them. We can also identify feelings as we are experiencing them and find more appropriate ways of reacting. Detached observance keeps our transient mental experiences from controlling us.

The third step we can take, after we have uncluttered and calmed our mental processes, is known as walking your why. Walking your Why is the practice of walking toward your values, of taking action in a way that is concordant with your values. Recognizing, accepting, and then distancing yourself from the scary, or painful, or disruptive emotional experiences gives you the ability to integrate your thinking and feeling with long term values and aspirations.

The last step is about cultivating the mindsets, motivations and habits that are aligned with our values, and is critical to real, meaningful change.



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