

Embrace Authenticity: How to Break Free from the Tyranny of Positivity by Heleo Editors

Susan David is the author of *Emotional Agility*, a leading psychologist at Harvard Medical School, and the co-founder and co-director of the Institute of Coaching at McLean Hospital. She recently joined Maria Shriver—award-winning journalist, bestselling author of six books, and former First Lady of California—for a conversation on why relentless positivity doesn't lead to happiness, and how being emotionally honest can help us connect with our values and gain resilience.

This conversation has been edited and condensed.

Maria: You are a counter voice to so many people telling us, “Be positive, be happy, have a great mood, and everything will be fine.”

Susan: From a very young age, I became interested in this central question: what does it take internally in the way we deal with our thoughts, emotions, and stories, to help us thrive in the world? I'm a psychologist at Harvard Medical School. The broader research [shows] that this incessant focus on “just be positive” actually undermines our resilience.

Maria: Telling people, “Just be happy. What's wrong with you? Have a good attitude.” That actually hurts.

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Susan: It does, and I had my own experience with this when I was 15 years old. My father was diagnosed with terminal cancer, and I had this group of people coming to me and saying, “Just be positive. Everything will be okay.” It wasn't okay. My father was dying, and then dead. I engaged in a relationship with this amazing teacher who instead of saying, “Just be positive,” she showed up to me. She was an English teacher, and she invited me to explore in a journal what I was going through. What I realized afterwards was that “just be positive” didn't help me. What did help was engaging with myself in a way that was honest.

A friend of mine who recently died of stage four breast cancer described this focus on being happy all the time as the tyranny of positivity.

She said, “If it was just a case of being positive, the friends in my stage four breast cancer support group would be alive today, because they were the most positive people you met. By telling us to just be and think positive, it makes us feel culpable in our own death, that somehow we weren't positive enough. We couldn't think ourselves out of the situation. It stops me from being authentic with myself, with my experience, and being able to be present with the people that I love.”

Maria: How do we get unstuck? How do we be authentic with ourselves, and if we encounter someone today who says, “I’m having a really bad day?”

I would never dare to say to my mother, “I’m having a bad day. I’m struggling.” She used to always say, “I don’t want to hear a yip out of you. Get going.” I didn’t feel like I grew up in a home where I had permission to complain. I carried that on a little bit, even to my own children. I’ve tried to open a space for them to complain, but where’s the balance?

Susan: First, people who focus on being happy actually, over time, become less happy. To be clear, I’m not anti-happiness. It’s more that our happiness comes not as a goal, but as a byproduct of engaging in honesty with ourselves.

Maria: How do we do that?

Susan: One of the first things is showing up. Instead of trying to push our emotions aside or trying to put on a happy face—what I call bottling and brooding—instead, literally drop any struggle that you have within yourself by ending the battle. Not saying to yourself, “I’m unhappy, but I shouldn’t be unhappy.” Or, “I’m miserable in my job, but at least I’ve got a job.”

Really just open up to the fact that we have a full range of emotions. These emotions have helped us and evolved to enable us to position ourselves effectively in the world.

Maria: You have a couple other steps. What are they?

“Our difficult emotions point to the things that we value.”

Susan: One is stepping out of our emotions. It’s important to recognize that our emotions contain data. I’ve never met a mother who’s feeling guilty about her parenting who, at some level, isn’t wanting to be present and connected with her children. Our difficult emotions [point] to the things that we value.

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Instead of struggling with whether we should or shouldn’t feel something, it’s important for us to say, “What is the function of this emotion? What is the value? What is this emotion trying to tell me?”

Within that, it’s important for us to recognize that our emotions are data, not directions. Because you feel guilty doesn’t mean you need to feel guilty. Because you feel angry doesn’t mean you need to attack the people that you’re angry with. We can create space, the “stepping out” part. ([Click here to take the Emotional Agility quiz](#)).

Maria: Your theory is that if we get to know ourselves, if we slow down enough, figure out what is really going on, give ourselves space to complain, to write—that, in turn, allows you to get unstuck and be stronger, hence happier?

Susan: Absolutely. One of the most beautiful embodiments of emotional agility comes from Viktor Frankl, who survived the Nazi death camps. The idea that’s attributed to him is this: “between stimulus and response there is a space, and in that space is our power to choose, and it’s in that choice that comes our growth and freedom.” So often, we get hooked by our emotions and thoughts. We treat them as fact, so there’s no space

between the stimulus and response.

When you say something like, “I am stressed,” you are identifying all of you with being stressed. I talk about very practical strategies. [Say,] “I’m noticing that I’m feeling angry,” or “I’m noticing that I’m feeling stressed.” Instead of being one and the same as stress, you are recognizing that you’re experiencing an emotion.

One thing which is so powerful is to hear the heartbeat of our own why. We live in a world where everyone is telling us what to think, how to look, how to feel. There’s fascinating research showing that we are subject to social contagion, where we start subtly picking up the behaviors of others. We go into an elevator, everyone’s looking at their phones, so we take out ours. If you’re on an airplane, if your seat partner buys candy, even if you don’t know that person, you are 30% more likely to buy candy.

Maria: I saw that last night. I was on the plane. The guy next to me got pretzels and peanuts, and I was like, “Maybe I should have some of those. They really smell good.” Then you’re having a whole debate with yourself. I really didn’t want them, but it’s social contagion.

Susan: Yet, if we start to hear the heartbeat of our own why—who I want to be in the situation, in this discussion, in this world—it actually protects us from social contagion.

“We often use just three or four emotions to describe what we’re feeling, and yet the research shows that when we use more differentiated language about our emotions, it actually helps us over time to become more resilient.”

Maria: One of the things I really liked that you’re talking about is to expand your emotional vocabulary. We all use “I’m mad,” “I’m stressed.” But particularly if you’re a parent, instead of saying to your kids, “I can’t talk to you now, I’m stressed,” actually lay out all of these different emotions—what stress actually means. Maybe you’re scared. Maybe you’re afraid. Maybe you failed at the office. Use other words.

Susan: This is a really critical skill. We often use just three or four emotions to describe what we’re feeling, and yet the research shows that when we use more differentiated language about our emotions, and when we help our children to do the same, it actually helps us over time to become more resilient. How do we engage, in practical ways, with ourselves in a way that is curious and compassionate? Label our emotions effectively, and come to a point where we are able to say, “This is the way that I want to be in the situation.”

Values are often thought of as these very abstract things, on walls in offices, but ultimately have little meaning. But actually every single day all of us have hundreds of opportunities to make choices that are towards or away from our values. If we can start recognizing that values are actually qualities of action rather than abstract things, it helps us to thrive.

Maria: What’s important about agility and resilience is that everybody needs resilience to get through life, because no matter who you are, stuff happens. We hear a lot about how to raise resilient children, but what about adults who weren’t raised to express their emotions, to think about their values, to write? Who may struggle with depression, with that critical voice. Can they build resilience in their 20s, 30s, 40s, 50s, 60s?

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Susan: Absolutely, people can develop capability around these skills.

Life's beauty is inseparable from its fragility. We're healthy until we're not. We're with the people we love until we aren't. We nag our children to clean their rooms until one day we walk in and the child is off at college. So developing this capability is really important, and absolutely we are raised [with] display rules. Display rules are the implicit or sometimes even explicit rules that families have about which emotions are okay. "Go to your room when you're angry, and come out when you've got a smile on your face," or "we don't do sadness here." We carry these display rules into our lives, and this can lead to situations where we no longer trust our emotions or are open to what we experiencing.

First, try to welcome your emotions. To not fight with them. They're there for a reason, and that reason is to help us calibrate and position ourselves more effectively in the world.

Maria: Also, to know yourself better. That doesn't mean you're a narcissist, selfish, or self-centered. Moving humanity forward starts with yourself. It starts at your own kitchen table. How you interact with other people. Do you know your neighbors? Do you get involved in your local community? What kind of parent are you? What kind of citizen are you? You don't have to be running for office.

In your opinion, how do you feel you're moving humanity forward? What kind of society do you envision if everybody were to read this book? What would be the direct result?

Susan: The first thing that I envision is a society in which we are more compassionate with ourselves as well as with others.

The second thing that I would see is a society that isn't driven by anger or sadness or any particular emotion, but rather that is driven by values. What I'm trying to do is help people to become more connected with themselves, and to recognize that so much of the change is not about making enormous changes.

[It's] tiny tweaks: the tiny tweak of "I love this person—but every time they come home from work I hardly get up from my computer to even say hello to them," or "I want to be a present parent and yet I'm on my phone at the dinner table."

Make a small change. We can take a habit that we've already got and piggyback onto that habit in ways that are values-aligned. You put your keys into a particular drawer? Put your cell phone into the drawer, as well, so that you have a conversation with your child where you aren't on the phone.

How do we enter into a space that allows us to be more honest, more connected, and to make actual changes on the ground? The hope is that people can engage in that space where they are more compassionate, more connected with their values, and more able to bring their values to their everyday lives.

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Maria: Then that will make you happy.

Susan: As a byproduct.

Maria: You're not shooting for happiness. You're shooting to create a more conscious, caring, and compassionate community, country, and world; to get unstuck, embrace change, to be resilient, so that you can handle whatever life throws at you, being able to say, "This is hard. I don't have to medicate it. I don't have to drink it away. I can feel it. I can write it down. I can rip it up, and I can make it."

"It's not about doing away with your fear, but recognizing your fear, your anger, and still choosing to walk in the direction of your values."

Susan: It's so powerful, and that enables us to also do the same with our children, to allow them to create the space to feel jealousy or anger or whatever they feel. These same principals apply to them. By 2030 the World Health Organization predicts that depression—not cancer, not heart disease, not diabetes—will be the leading cause of disability globally. Our children are growing up in a world that is unprecedented in terms of its complexity, change, geopolitical tension, technology. Starting to cultivate these skills in ourselves as well as others is critical.

How would you see yourself as being an architect of change in your own life? It might be at your dinner table, it might be out in the world, but that's a core question to bring to the surface at this time in our country.

Maria: Whatever you're doing in your own life and in your own home does impact the world. What the world needs are people who are conscious, caring, compassionate, who see themselves as citizens, and believe that they're here for some specific purpose and reason. To find that, you need to have an advanced emotional vocabulary. You need to slow down, and be aware of how susceptible you may be to this.

Susan: Many people are feeling really troubled at the moment, and when we think about being fearful or angry, people tell us to control our fear, our anger, and do away with it. These emotions are normal, and help us to position ourselves effectively in the world. Courage is not an absence of fear. Courage is fear walking. It's not about doing away with your fear, but recognizing your fear, your anger, and still choosing to walk in the direction of your values.

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