



Emotional Agility

Get Unstuck, Embrace Change, and Thrive in Work and Life

Susan David.

Given the popularity of Emotional Intelligence (or Quotient) in mainstream leadership discussions and increasingly as part of leadership development, Susan David's latest publication adds to the literature.

Reviewed by David Hanlon

About Susan

Susan is a psychologist on the faculty of Harvard Medical School; co-founder and co-director of the Institute of Coaching at McLean Hospital; and CEO of Evidence Based Psychology, a boutique business consultancy. Originally from South Africa, Susan lives outside Boston with her family.

We are fortunate to have been trained many years ago by Susan in the Mayer-Salovey-Caruso Emotional Intelligence Test (**MSCEIT**): an instrument we continue to use with Susan's input in our leadership programs.

Before we start – contexting emotions

The evolution of our emotions

As we have evolved, so have our emotions. Modern evolutionary theory suggests four distinct periods:

- First **Primal** emotions, such as fear, which are associated with ancient parts of the brain and these seemingly evolved among our pre-mammal ancestors.
- Second **Filial** emotions, such as a human mother's love for her offspring, seem to have evolved among early mammals.
- Third **Social** emotions, such as guilt and pride, evolved among social primates.
- Fourth A more recently evolved part of the brain **moderates** an older part of the brain, such as when the cortex moderates the amygdala's fear response.

Distinguishing emotions, feelings and moods

Joshua Freedman, founder of Six Seconds, an Emotional Intelligence consulting and training company and author of *At the Heart of Leadership*, has neatly differentiated these and I have reproduced his definitions below¹.

1. **Emotions** are chemicals released in response to our interpretation of a specific trigger. It takes our brains about 1/4 second to identify the trigger, and about another 1/4 second to produce the chemicals. By the way, emotion chemicals are released throughout our bodies, not just in our brains, and they form a kind of feedback loop between our brains & bodies. *They last for about six seconds.*
2. **Feelings** happen as we begin to integrate the emotion, to think about it, to “let it soak in.” In English, we use “feel” for both physical and emotional sensation — we can say we physically feel cold, but we can also emotionally feel cold. This is a clue to the meaning of “feeling,” it’s something we sense. Feelings are more “cognitively saturated” (a blend of thinking and feeling) as the emotion chemicals are processed in our brains and bodies. *Feelings are often fuelled by a mix of emotions, and last longer than emotions.*
3. **Moods** are more generalised. They’re not tied to a specific incident, but a collection of inputs. Mood is heavily influenced by our environment (weather, lighting, colour, people around us), by our physiology (what we’ve been eating, how we’ve been exercising, if we have a cold or not, how well we slept), by our thinking (where we’re focusing attention), and by our current emotions. *Moods can last minutes, hours, even days.*

How many emotions do we experience?

The literature indicates a range of basic emotions from 1 to 8. Below, we outline the core 8 from the work of Robert Plutchik:

1. **Fear** → feeling afraid. Other words are *terror* (strong fear), *shock*, *phobia*
2. **Anger** → feeling angry. A stronger word for anger is *rage*.
3. **Sadness** → feeling sad. Other words are *sorrow*, *grief* (a stronger feeling, for example when someone has died) or *depression* (feeling sad for a long time). Some people think depression is a different emotion.
4. **Joy** → feeling happy. Other words are *happiness*, *gladness*.
5. **Disgust** → feeling something is wrong or dirty
6. **Trust** → a positive emotion; admiration is stronger; acceptance is weaker
7. **Anticipation** → in the sense of looking forward positively to something which is going to happen. Expectation is more neutral.
8. **Surprise** → how one feels when something unexpected happens

When we move to the level of emotions/feelings/moods, the number escalates with some sources suggesting we can experience over 30,000 types of “emotional” responses.

¹ <http://www.6seconds.org/2015/01/02/emotion-feeling-mood>

And, as many people are aware, Charles Darwin, in his 1872, book *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*, pointed out that human expressions of emotion were both innate and universal across cultures. We all demonstrate our core emotions in the same way.

About the book

The value in this book is that it provides a roadmap or framework for getting a better understanding of our own emotions and how they play out. As David points out, there is a large body of research that shows that when we are able to differentiate and be fairly nuanced around our so-called negative emotions, that this is a critical psychological skill.

For example, there is a very big difference between being stressed versus disappointed, stressed versus frustrated, stressed versus angry, stressed versus worried, stressed versus I'm not sure that I'm really making the strides that I thought I would be making in my career at the moment.

We are only able to start actually resolving a situation effectively when we can put an accurate label to that emotion.

The chapters

Some of the take-home messages from book are highlighted below.

Chapters 2 and 3 discuss the key impediments to improving your emotional agility whilst Chapters 4 and 5 identify some of the common tools to help shift emotional states.

Chapter 6 talks about the importance of knowing your purpose (who you are versus what you do). The rest of the book provides guidelines to building your own, your workplace and your children's emotional agility.

1: Rigidity to agility

In this chapter, David outlines the four essential steps to emotional agility:

1. Showing up, which translated means facing up to and acknowledging the emotion that you are experiencing.
2. Stepping out, is the practice of detaching yourself from the experience. Students of Neuro Linguistic Programing (NLP) would label this as taking the Observer (or 3rd person) position.
3. Walking your why. David takes us back to our core – linking to those values that are important to us.
4. Moving on is setting up the framework for small steps, directly linked to your values works best to improve your agility.

2: Hooked

David identifies the key anchors to improving our emotional agility. The four most common hooks:

1. Thought blaming is where we blame ourselves for our actions/inactions. Blaming allows us to avoid looking at ourselves and taking ownership.

2. Monkey-mindedness is a great term that comes from meditation – it is the label for that constant head chatter. With an estimated 60,000 thoughts a day and the vast majority of them the same as yesterday, its easy to see how we “constantly swing from one thought to another”.
3. Old, outgrown ideas. Are your thoughts and ideas at their use-by date? That is, what we thought was appropriate behaviour just doesn’t stack up in the new environment. Yet, we still cling to old outmoded ideas.
4. Wrongheaded righteousness. We hold people in judgement because our beliefs don’t marry up with the beliefs and/or behaviours of others. So, we become righteous and therefore remove the possibility of understanding.

3: Trying to unhook

1. Spiralling in angst. David leads into this section with a short quiz, which leads us to identify if we are “bottlers” (more so in men) or “brooders” (more so in women).
2. Hooked on happiness can be just as debilitating as the two types above since we set high expectations about “being happy” about an event or a job, etc., that when these expectations aren’t met, we slump.
3. Good news about bad moods – if not perpetual, help in a number ways to establish reality such as helping memory, reducing confirmation bias.
4. The upside of anger (and other challenging emotions) is they are raw feelings which, if examined impartially, send good signals about what we need to learn about ourselves.

4: Showing up

1. Self-compassion is acceptance of what occurred and stepping out of the self-defeating emotions like blame and anger.
2. Self-compassion is not about lying to yourself. As David points out, you can’t have self-compassion without first facing the truth about yourself, otherwise it is delusion.
3. Self-compassion does not make you weak or lazy. There is a misconception that you need to be tough on yourself to maintain your edge: perhaps generated through the popularisation of “Mental toughness”. Our comparative mindset is one of the biggest blockers of self-compassion: I am not as good as him/her.
4. Your inner critic. Identify the reality and what practically can be done (here and now) rather than creating negative stories in your head (“I am too fat”, I can’t get the time to...”, etc.)

*When we lack compassion, we see the world as just as unforgiving as we are, so the very idea of failure is crippling.
(p73)*

5. Choosing willingness. David makes a great point: "you can't choose or control your desires. You *can* choose whether you take a second helping of dessert".
6. What the Func? No it's not what you think!!! It's shorthand for "what is the purpose of this emotion?" "What is it telling you?"

By going external, confronting your internal feelings and your external options, you have a much greater chance of exercising the option that is closest to your values.

When we are emotionally agile, we don't waste time wrestling with our impulses. We simply make choices that are connected with what we value. (ps)

5: Stepping out

Basically this chapter touches on ways of moving from 1st Person to 3rd Person. The examples and techniques are varied and they will have different appeal to different personality types.

1. Pennebaker's writing rules. Pennebaker was one of the first to recognise the linkage between writing and recovering from trauma. His approach (and we have used a variant of it), is proven to be helpful in balancing emotional states.
2. The secret life of what you see and techniques for stepping out. David again, refers to the "Other" (3rd person) perspective. It is a proven technique for removing "attachment to the emotional state".
3. Ways for becoming more mindful. A few simple tips for increasing awareness.
4. Creating the space in between. If done well, this is a powerful practice: realising that the "label" we put on one of our undesirable beliefs about ourselves is just that – a label, a thought. We can work consciously to shift from the thought to creating an option of how we want to be.
5. Letting go. Is really about recognising the good in someone (or the actions) and focus on this rather than the negatives.

6: Walking your why

An important chapter that reinforces two important drivers of everyone: knowing your purpose and your values.

1. We make decisions that are not our own. A worthwhile reflection is to check how many decisions you make are based on other peoples beliefs, opinions, etc. rather than your own?
2. What do I want my life to look like? WHO you are (your why or purpose as distinct from what you do).

Values vs Goals

Values - How and quality

Goals - what and quantity

3. Identifying your values. HOW you want to live your life (as we frequently say, how you behave today is another step towards the legacy you will leave – it is the one you want to leave?).
4. The whistle-blower. Walking your values. These two point to a test of character – what we generally refer to as your values in action. Are you prepared to stand up for what is right, even if no-one is watching?
5. Goal conflicts. Far too often, we get torn between what we think we have to do versus what we think we need or must do. Choices always have to be made. The best reflection is how often you choose on the basis of goals that conflict with what you believe to be your values.

In the absence of knowing your purpose and having clarity around your values, you have no choice but to live the values and purpose of others.

7: Moving on: tiny tweaks principle

Emotional agility can be improved – and like all great principles – it is best practiced with small steps rather than attempting to do everything at once.

1. Tweaking our mindsets. This is sort of “first things first”. How fixed is our mindset. Fixed mindset people versus those with a growth mindset have difficulty adapting, changing, accepting things that don’t fit their world view and, as a result, find it difficult to change.
2. Tweaking our motivations. Shifting the focus is an important lesson here. Learning to shift the focus from “*what we think we must do*” to “*what we want as the result*”.
3. Tweaking our habits. David introduces the concept of choice points. For each intention we have there is a context and a choice point. For example,

Intention:	Exercise
Context:	Hotel room before dinner
Choice point:	Check emails or leave computer in bag

8: Moving on: the teeter-totter principle

1. The curse of comfort. How often do we suspend effort in change, preferring instead what we call, “*living in comfortable misery*”. We revert to the familiar rather than risking the challenge, anxiety of change.
2. The coherence of bad decisions. Basically David is suggesting that we take comfort in the “comfortable”, the safe or the immediate, rather than sacrificing that situation for a better one later on. The pain of exercise versus the pleasure of remaining in bed.
3. Choosing comfort, safety or whatever versus avoiding challenge is one greatest curses of success. It takes commitment to complete and this is where alignment with your deeper values comes to fore.

The greatest curse of success is Avoidance.

4. Stayingwhelmed relates to the fact that many of us get to the “it’ll do” point and then either remain static or revert to old habits. An interesting study of Morse Code operators revealed that the best (over 75%) gave up serious practice when they reached what they thought was the peak and remained at a plateau. The remaining 25% broke through this plateau and increased their skill levels.
5. Grit versus quit. David here reminds us that, if we practice some of the tools outlined in earlier chapters (unhooking), it helps improve our emotional agility – becoming more aligned with our deepest values and realise goals, no matter what the circumstances.

9: Emotional agility at work

1. Hooked at work and individual hooks happens so frequently that we take it for granted. We exist in a whirlwind of states that hijack us emotionally. Creating or perpetuating stories reduces our capacity to deal with situations as they are and give us a chance to move on.
2. Group hooks and hooked groups. Sadly, we fall into “group think” far too often. When this happens in the work place, it is a recipe for disaster – the whisper of the mass redundancies, a new boss, etc. increase anxiety and tension without anyone able to break the state. And we are unable to break this state due to being hooked to the group – “it was not my place to speak up” sought of thinking.
3. Showing up versus deep immersion in work. Workplace stress is well known and frequently discussed. What is less known is the downside of “stressing about stress”. Denying stress, bottling it or brooding on it is counter productive. The smart way to deal with it is to acknowledge it, create the space between it and you – go to that 3rd position. However to be successful, you first must acknowledge and label it. On the other hand, those of us whose WHY is aligned with work, are more likely to cope with stress.

Stressing about workplace stress is far more toxic than the stress itself.

10: Raising emotionally agile children

1. Taking the plunge is to begin by drawing out the emotion and what that might mean to the child. For example, if the child was able to jump from the high board, what might that feeling be (excited and proud) versus backing down (relieved at some level at stepping away from the stress point but disappointed in not having done it). The next step is to explore what s/he might do to achieve what was important.
2. Leading by example is simply calling the state for what it is and then giving the next outcome. Saying “it’s not okay but it will be” rather than saying “It’s okay” is far more effective in building emotional agility when we are giving the correct core label at the time.
3. Seeing you, seeing me is a great little reminder that children especially want first to know they are acknowledged rather than being noticed and then summarily dismissed.

4. How to think provides a great little framework for dealing with situations
 - Honour the child for who he actually is (not someone you wish him to be)
 - Give him a choice (don't solve it for them)
 - Provide a rationale for the decisions you make
 - Minimise external rewards.

5. Raising children who care has a couple of useful takeaways. The first is creating opportunities for kids to show compassion. Second, when something happens have the conversation in private not in front of others.

In summary

It is not a book with a lot of new material, however it does put a complex subject into a readable form. The theory is supported by lots of stories around each topic, which make reading more digestible for many.

David Hanlon is the founder of the Right Mind International Pty Ltd. He conducts his consulting and training activities globally. His leadership program, Conversations for Growth®, was a 2010 finalist in the Australian Institute of Training and Development's Australian Learning Innovation award.