Emotional Agility

Dr. Susan David is a Psychologist who works at Harvard Medical School studying “emotional agility.” She defines emotional agility as the capacity to accept all of our emotions, even the messy, difficult ones and to look at our emotions with curiosity and compassion. She proposes that defining emotions as “good” or “bad” is unrealistic. Life’s beauty is intertwined with its tragedy. The only certain thing in life is that it will be fraught with uncertainties. Dr. David talks about the contradictory rigidness we seem to have about emotions. We either excessively brood about them, getting stuck in our own head; or, we push them down. We assume that only certain emotions are “okay.” When we feel the “not okay” emotions or see others express them, we want to quickly suppress them or jump to a solution. However, when emotions are ignored or suppressed, they get stronger – a psychological response call “amplification.” When people tell Dr. David that they don’t want to try because they don’t want to “feel disappointed” or when they say “I just want this feeling to go away,” she tells them “I understand….but you have dead people’s goals.” What she means is that only dead people never get sad, disappointed, broken hearted, stressed, overwhelmed, anxious, etc. Similarly, I tell my clients that, if you want to live your life fully and if you want to be in relationships, you will experience joy and successes, but you will also necessarily experience disappointment, failure, heartache, grief, etc. She states “discomfort is the price of admission to a meaningful life.” Rather than suppressing or obsessing, what she recommends is to look at emotions as data. It shows us what we care about, what we value, what we feel strongly about. It should push you to take active steps to shape your life in a direction that align with your values. Emotions are not our identity. We often say “I am sad,” when really what we mean is “I feel sad right now.” When we view it this way, we can be more curious about that feeling. Why am I feeling sad right now? What do I need to change? What changes in my life will align with my basic values and will guide me toward my best and most authentic self? Emotions are data and not directives. If we can take a nonjudgmental stance, we will less inclined to act impulsively or erratically when strong emotions are felt. Rather we can use our emotions as data that tell us about what needs to happen in our lives and we will build the courage to take value-connected steps when dealing with life’s necessary discomforts.