

ADVENTURES IN BEHAVIOUR CHANGE - JOSHUA FREEDMAN (Katie Elliott & Joshua Freedman)

Joshua Freedman is CEO and one of the co-founders of Six Seconds, the global community growing emotional intelligence. An educator, author, researcher and parent, Josh translates the latest neuroscience of emotion into practical insights we can all use to live better.

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Welcome Joshua.

Thank you.

It's so lovely to chat with you. I have to say a big thank you to you and you probably don't know why.

Wait, no, I don't know why.

You don't know why. So I had some dental treatment this morning and I came home from the dentist and I was feeling really sorry for myself. And then in preparation for this conversation, I was just looking on YouTube to see if I could find some videos of you talking about the work that you do. And I found your TED talk from 2014.

Hmm.

And you smile so much that - you know how smiling - you can't help but if you see somebody smiling a lot, you have to smile back? So, despite myself, I've been smiling all afternoon thanks to your TED talk - so thank you for that!

Thank you!

I have to say that actually smiling's not the most comfortable thing right now but, on balance, I think it was a win.

I'll try to be very serious then.

Oh no, no, please don't. It's true, isn't it? When we see other people smiling, it does seem to trigger a smiling response. Do you know anything about that?

Well, it's fascinating actually. The term is emotional contagion. It sounds rather alarming, but actually all emotions are social and probably, you know, we're pack animals like wolves maybe, and some kinds of chimpanzees are also pack animals, but the way we interact and relate to others is actually quite central to our survival and understanding that relationship very quickly and what's safe and where do I stand and who's got my back and do I fit in - these aren't like, "Oh yeah, it'd be nice if we could have those things". These are central primal drivers of our survival at, you know, ancestral levels, like deep in our DNA. We're wired to be part of the group and understand where we are in the group. And emotions are an almost instantaneous and automatic signal that gives us this data about where do we stand in the group. And so we're constantly transmitting. It's like a radio that's always playing and we're constantly receiving. And what's interesting about emotional contagion is that it doesn't matter if you believe in emotions, it doesn't matter if you think they matter, doesn't matter if you're actively paying attention to them. It's happening. This radio station is broadcasting and receiving. But if you do pay attention, you do tune in, you can be more accurate and effective in this communication. So it's like this communication that's happening inside us and between us all the time, whether we're conscious or not, and when we pay attention, we better at it.

So I've caught your smile. You can probably hear it coming back to you now, cos you can hear smiles as well. I was reading something the other day that said that if you hear somebody smiling, it makes you smile. You don't even have to see them.

I mean, it's also true with stress. You know, how many times have you gone into a workplace or, you know, a train and people are stressed and you're just like, "Oh man, I can feel this impending doom that's out there somewhere". And by the way, you know, in the world today, what we have since that Ted talk in 2014 where I said stress is at an all-time-high? Well, I was wrong. It's at an all-time-higher. And the Edelman Trust Barometer scores just came out, which is this worldwide study on trust they publish every year. Trust has declined again. And so we're living in this time of a lot of emotional fragility and you know, I think we need some more infectious smiles out there, but we also need to grapple with the complex emotions that are all around us.

So I think it would be fair to say that you're something of an expert on the subject of emotional intelligence. Would that be fair?

Well, if you asked my children, they might have some doubts about that! I have been working in this area full-time for almost 25 years, and I'm one of the only people in the world for whom that's true. So there's a handful of us who've really been focused on learning about and studying and teaching emotional intelligence for quite a while. And so in that sense, I guess, I could be an expert.

So what interests me about, well, there are lots of things actually that interest me about our emotions, but I would consider myself to be quite a kind of emotional person.

Hmm.

I feel things really, really intensely. But something that I've always found problematic is, I feel very often in the world, it's quite hard to communicate about those things. And it's also quite hard for them to be taken seriously. So if you're someone who's quite in tune with the emotional landscape around them and perhaps the landscape within them and they're very affected by what's going on, it's quite easy to dismiss the language of emotions, you know, from a logical, rational viewpoint. It's quite easy to put that down and say it's not real. But actually it is real, isn't it? So how, how can we understand that better? And how can we develop more respect for the information that we're getting from our emotional responses?

Well, I'll just say - hint, go to the end of the podcast and hear the challenge, because that's exactly what I want to share. But we are in a world where many, many societies have developed this bias about emotions and in a lot of Romance languages, emotional words are feminine, a lot of emotional words are considered weak. We have this kind of archetype of, you know, master and commander, you know, sailing the high seas with this Stoic, you know, unflappable demeanour. And it's not really working very well, you know, and these sort of hard nut, 1950s or whatever, 1850s archetypes, they're not surviving and thriving in today's world. And so I think one of the questions is, you know, is the world the same as it was 150, 200 years ago? And therefore, do we need the same skills to lead ourselves and lead one another and exist in the world? And my sense is the world's changed a little bit. And so maybe it's time for us to adapt a little bit. And then we can start getting into the neuroscience and seeing that emotions are affecting every living cell in the human body. They're part of our regulatory system and how we feel changes how we think and how we act, even if we're not conscious of it. So what that means is if you actually want to be rational, get over it! Confront reality. We are not just rational, and if we don't take that kind of non-rational part into an account, we're being just really irrational. So for me, I mean I'd say I kind of come from the opposite problem, Katie. I grew up in a family of hyper-rational - my parents are both statisticians - and so emotions were not really central to my understanding of the world. And you know, people who have the problem you described of like feeling too much would talk to me who was feeling too little and I might well have been kind of saying, "Okay, well get over it, let's move on". And neither of us were going to actually get great results. And so somehow we have to find this middle ground where, you know, no, I don't think every feeling needs to be expressed. I don't think every feeling is right. You know, I make mistakes balancing my checkbook and I make mistakes with emotions, but that doesn't mean I should ignore my check balance and it doesn't mean I should ignore all my emotions. Right? I need to get smarter about both of those things.

I need to rewind a bit now. So you come from a family in which it wasn't easy to talk about or recognise emotions.

I was afraid of emotions.

But now you're at the forefront of work encouraging other people in becoming more emotionally intelligent. That's amazing.

One of my colleagues says, "We teach what we most need to learn".

Well, actually yes, certainly I can relate to that. That's amazing though and...

I can tell you how it happened actually. There was a moment, I mean it's a long story over the last 25 years, but there was a moment when I was a first year teacher and I was feeling really overwhelmed and stressed and I had a lot going on and I went to the Executive Director of the school where I taught, who is the president of Six Seconds now and who I'm still working with 30 years later. And I said, "You know, Anabel I, er, um, think maybe, you know", and got to the point of saying, I think I might be depressed. And what's somebody supposed to say when you say that? You know, they're supposed to say, "Oh, don't worry, you're fine". Right? I mean, that's, that's the rule. And Anabel just celebrated her 80th birthday - she's not big on these kinds of rules - and she said, "Oh yeah, I mean, I can see why you might be feeling that, you know, I think if I was dealing with what you're dealing with, I'd feel depressed too. So why didn't you just let yourself feel depressed for a while?" And I walked out of that meeting kind of light on my heels and like, "Oh, okay, great. So I feel depressed? Oh, hmm, okay, great". But what happened was, this was this moment where I was grappling with somethings emotionally really difficult and instead of, you know, overdramatising it or underdramatising it, she just acknowledged what I'm feeling and asked me to think about it and just gave me this message that it's okay to have feelings. And I then started experimenting with that as a teacher and I taught middle school so I had young adolescents where there was lots of feelings to practice on. And instead of like just saying, "Okay, we're talking about history now, leave that out of the room" or instead of wallowing in it, you know, which didn't seem to help either, I began to engage with my students in a different way and just saying, "Okay, that's interesting". And it really changed our relationship and it made studying history a lot easier. Like that for me was the beginning point.

So she validated what you experiencing and encouraged you to feel okay about that feeling even if it wasn't a you thought you should be having?

Yeah. I think that taking that word 'should' out is a very big project and that's really what the challenge I want to share is about.

Hmm. I've noticed in myself, as someone who has had quite a lot of emotional ups and downs, that a lot of problems come when that 'should' crops up and that, I suppose in my life, the biggest change that's happened, and that has coincided with me making a transition from being someone who struggled very seriously with their mental health to someone who is in pretty good shape relatively these days.

Congratulations.

Thank you. Thank you. The biggest change has been that now I am inclined to be curious about the emotions that crop up and I like to imagine that perhaps they're a sane response to something and that they might be telling me something useful rather than assuming that because they're inconvenient, they're a sign of some sort of dysfunction or madness. I just wonder how that sounds to you?

That sounds brilliant and so simple, but how much more sensible is that explanation than saying there's some feelings that, you know, we should have and some feelings we shouldn't have, and we need to sort those out and some of them are wrong and bad and some of them are desirable, but that's too much of that one, no, there's too little of that one. Like there's a Buddhist principle, which is : suffering comes from denying what is.

Hmm.

And I think it's very important to distinguish between suffering and pain or suffering and difficulty. I remember when I had ruptured my quadriceps tendon, which involves a certain amount of suffering and a great amount of pain for a very, very long time. But I got to really experience a difference, you know, and be in physical therapy and it was unbelievably painful at times and yet I could feel the difference between good pain and bad pain, you know. And we're talking about 18 months of grappling with this - and then, by the way, I did the other knee. That's another story.

Oh no!

So I had a lot of practice with this process. But suffering is, I think, pretty needless and I think it's pretty self- and other-destructive, whereas pain is just part of the cycle of life. And it teaches us something, it helps us with something, and we can move on. Suffering we perpetuate and we make deeper for no really good reason from a mental health perspective. And we talk about, you know, the difference between anxiety and an anxiety disorder. Anxiety is not suffering. Anxiety is difficult. It's a message, it's complicated, it's tough, it's painful. But an anxiety disorder is suffering because you're having more anxiety than there's really reason to have anxiety and it just, you know, it starts impairing your life. So anyway, suffering comes from denying what is. What happens if we can get ourselves into the state that you talked about, of just being curious about what is and saying, "Oh, something's happening". And our work at Six seconds started in that school that I talked about, we had a program called Self Science, which we still, it's a methodology we still teach for people to do this in schools and in businesses and in life, really. The methodology that we teach at Six Seconds comes from that. But the terms of science, the idea behind that term was can we learn to be scientists about ourselves? And kind of take that neutral observer and be in a learning space instead of that 'shoulding' space?

Yeah and just something you said about the difference between suffering and pain, it reminded me of something you alluded to in your TED talk where you were talking about the importance of meaning. So sometimes things in life can be painful, but there's a sense that they're part of something that's bringing growth or understanding or something that feels meaningful.

And isn't it interesting how we will go through a lot of difficulty for something that feels meaningful to us?

Mmm.

And, you know, a lot of my work is around change and how organisations change, how people change, how I hope societies can change. And when we can link change to purpose and we can say, "Oh, there's meaning in this". And just, for example, you think about the process of being a parent is a really, really hard job and yet it feels quite meaningful to many of us. And so we just say, "Okay, it's okay, I'm going to do that". Whereas, you know, something like trivial like, "Okay, well I have to do my taxes". If it feels meaningless to us, that just becomes an incredibly unpleasant experience.

I actually do have to submit my taxes later on today. I can hardly wait!

My wife and I have been starting to make big pile of papers. It doesn't feel all that meaningful right now.

So in, did you say 25 years you've been doing this work?

Mmm, yeah. We started Six Seconds officially in 1997, so 23 years ago.

And I imagine, during that time, there's been a lot of learning?

Yeah, it's been, I mean mostly, an incredibly enlivening experience for me to do this. And one of my favourite parts is now I travel a lot. Last year I was away from home for over 200 days. And most of that is really incredibly fulfilling, to meet people all over the world who are committed to doing this work. You can just imagine they're just lovely people to get to spend time with. And for me, it's done two things, personally. One is, I used to feel lonely a lot and now I hardly ever feel lonely because I feel that connection with this incredible community of people around the world. The other thing that it's done for me is I am increasingly clear that while there's tremendous and fascinating and meaningful and important differences between people, there's also an underlying reality that we are the same.

If you could go back to that little boy growing up in a family where emotions weren't talked about very much and there was some kind of distillation of some of those 25 years, what would you tell him?

Hmm. Well, it comes back to - I think I have to reveal it now - it comes back to the challenge that...

Oh go on then! What's the *Little Challenge*?

Really central to our conversation has been this idea of curiosity and 'it is what it is'. And so my challenge is for the next 30 days to just start experimenting with treating emotions as something neutral. Somebody says, "I'm so happy today". Instead of saying, "Oh, that's great", just say, "Oh, interesting". And you know, if somebody comes to you or you come to yourself and you say, "Oh, I'm miserable today". Instead of saying, "Oh, that's terrible" - guess what I want you to say? "That's interesting. Oh, interesting. What's happening? Tell me more". So I would like us all to experiment with emotions as a signal - a neutral signal, something's happening. I think it was Buffalo Springfield: "Something's happening here, what it is I'm not exactly clear". So, okay, emotions are a signal of something happening. And big emotions - and I love that term - the head of our coaching programs, Marilyn Jorgensen taught me that term. She, once upon a time, taught preschool. And she just would say, "Oh, it looks like you're having big feelings". And I heard her say this in a coaching session. I was just like, what a beautiful, simple expression. "It looks like you're having big feelings". So when you're having 'big feelings', what if it's a signal that you're perceiving something big?

You can't see it, but I'm just smiling in awe now. The idea of big feelings just went straight in. That resonates so much with me.

And you've been there, right? You've been there.

Yes, I do have very big feelings and I love that way of talking about it because it's not belittling and it's not judgmental, it's simply, yeah.... They are pretty big sometimes aren't they, for all of us?

So it's the opposite of denying what is, right? So, in other words, 'it is what it is'. Like, "Okay, so you're having big feelings and maybe you're misunderstanding the situation or maybe you're perceiving something that's really important. So let's not worry about that right now. Let's start with just acknowledging it. It is what it is. Okay, so you're having big feelings. Tell me more. And if we can practice that with ourselves and with each other, we move into this neutral conversation where, all of a sudden, we can learn something about feelings. And so I think, going back to my eight year old self, I thought I was supposed to only be happy. And I loved that you started by talking about my smile and I'm really happy that I smile freely now. But when I was eight years old, there was an airline company called PSA and they painted their airplanes with a big smile. (I'm dating myself now, this is in the 70s.) And

my school mates would tease me and call me PSJ because I had this big smile pasted on my face and at times it was because I was genuinely happy, but at other times it was because I thought that's what I was supposed to do. And so if I could go back to the eight year old self and say, "When you're having big feelings, whatever they are, just notice that. And it's okay. Whatever you're feeling, it's okay. Doesn't mean you have to do anything. It doesn't mean you have to fix it. Doesn't mean you need to make a change, just means there's something you're noticing".

That's so beautiful. Thank you. Thank you. And I can recommend, if anyone feels like they'd like to be smiling and they're not, watching your video is a great place to start. I would wholeheartedly recommend that.

Thank you.

So before we finish, are there places you would like people to find you or that they could be learning more about emotional intelligence and how they can equip themselves better in the world?

Yeah, I would start with our website, which is www.sixseconds.org. And, by the way, the neuroscience of that is that emotions are chemicals actually, at a neurobiological level. They are these little chains of protein that are running around in our brains and bodies and these molecules last for around six seconds. Whenever we feel something for more than six seconds at some level we're recreating that feeling. So you can read about that on sixseconds.org. And there's a ton of articles there for emotional intelligence in business and we have a lot of business cases from big companies like FedEx and Siemens to little, small manufacturing companies, schools, and a lot of articles about how we can learn more about emotions ourselves. And I would say, you know, whether you're a coach or a trainer or a facilitator or an individual or a mom or dad or grandma, there's a lot for us to learn in this fascinating realm and we love to share information about that and, even more, we love to share tools. So you'll find all over the website, there's tons of little worksheets and card games and tidbits that you can, some of them are for sale and there are tons of them that are available for free to just download and start using.

What a fantastic resource. Thank you. And I'll share links to all of those things on the website.

Wonderful.

Well, it's been an absolute delight talking with you. Thank you for smiling at me even though I can't see you.

Thank you.

You've definitely made my day happier, actually. But hey, that's just interesting.

Yes, it is. That is interesting. And I hope that the rest of your day continues to be fascinating.

Thank you so much.

Thank you.