

How to Control Your Emotions at Work (S8:E4)(Transcript)

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INTRO:

I think of spaces as a tool for managing emotions that are hidden in plain sight. It's just waiting to be activated and some people really, really get it. But a lot of people don't. It's an underappreciated, underutilized tool.

If you've ever felt something big at work and wondered if it was quote "professional"? Maybe it was frustration over a project gone sideways or disappointment with a coworker or even excitement for a new opportunity. Turns out, our emotions don't clock out when we clock in. And my guest today says that's not a bad thing. He argues all emotions are valuable, even in the workplace.

4:53 -5:06 all of our emotions serve an important function, so we don't want to feel bad about experiencing them. What we want is to get better at not experiencing them out of proportion. That is the big problem I think human beings face.

Welcome to Work Better, the Steelcase podcast where we think about work and ways to make it better. I'm your host Chris Congdon and my guest today is author and researcher Ethan Kross. Ethan has spent his career decoding why we feel what we feel—and what we can actually do about it. He's the author of two books, Chatter and Shift.

Ethan shares how it is possible to gain control over our emotions at work, and the physical environment can play a significant role in helping us regulate our feelings. Here's more from Ethan.

Chris Congdon: I want to start with maybe some foundational things in your work, Ethan. And I wanna start with just the idea of emotions and experiencing both positive and negative emotions as part of our work experience. And I mean, I think anybody who's felt, you know, excitement at work or who's had those nights where you're laying awake, ruminating about something like we all know the emotions you perceive

Ethan Kross: You've had those nights?

Chris Congdon: Oh, Ethan, that, you know, like, let's turn off the recording and let me tell you, but I think everybody has those, right?

Ethan Kross: Oh yeah.

Chris Congdon: And so let's, let's just talk about that from the beginning. Like how do our emotions play out and how might they help us or hinder us from working better?

Ethan Kross: Yeah, it's a great question and it allows me from the outset to tackle a couple of myths that are out there about emotions and the way they factor into our lives.

So a lot of people think that negative emotions are bad for us. And yeah, I'm not a proponent of that belief. I believe that is interesting. All of our emotions when they're experiencing the right proportions serve a valuable function. So what do I mean by right proportions? I mean, not too intense and not lasting too long. You may think I'm nuts here but just bear with me for a minute. I actually value the fact that I can experience anxiety. Or sadness or anger, those emotional experiences. So see, you're, you're nodding. You do think I'm crazy. I knew it.

Chris Congdon: No, but I mean, I think most people would go like, I don't wanna feel anxiety, it makes me anxious.

Ethan Kross: And that's precisely why it's such a valuable state. So when I think back to moments in my career, earlier on, I remember there was this one presentation that I gave and it just fell flat. You know, normally I go in there and there's just, there's energy and there's excitement, and everyone is like, it's this almost, you know, dare I say, even magical experience.

You connect with an audience and this one, it was just no energy. And when I went back to reflect on, well, what was different about that one compared to all of the other ones, I didn't have any butterflies in my stomach. Any anxiety a few days before that normally motivates me to hunker down, look at my slides, tweak them a little bit, make new connections. Anxiety is a really useful emotional response that tells us, "Hey, pay attention". There's something in the future that potentially could be important. So a little bit of anxiety. It's helpful.

So here's how I define an emotion. An emotion is a response to things that happen to us in the world or that we imagine that are meaningful, okay? And we, human beings, have evolved these very quick responses to help us deal with those meaningful situations.

Sometimes happiness is helpful. Sometimes it's a little bit of sadness. Sometimes it's anger, but 4:53 -5:06 all of our emotions serve an important function, so we don't want to feel bad about experiencing them. What we want is to get better at not experiencing them out of proportion. That is the big problem I think human beings face.

Chris Congdon: Yeah. You know, one of the things that you said in your book that just really stuck with me is the idea that emotions are information.

Ethan Kross: That's right.

Chris Congdon: I never thought about that before. Can you just talk about that?

Ethan Kross: Yeah. So emotions provide us with information about what we're experiencing and what needs to happen, and it's just another valuable tidbit. So when I'm sad. Sadness is an experience, an emotional experience we have when we've experienced some loss that we cannot replace. I get rejected and it's not, I'm not getting receptive, like story of school for me asking girls out on dates. No, thank you, it's not happening. Move on. You lose someone you love. Right? They're not coming back. We haven't figured out how to bring it back. You get fired, you lose a deal.

All of these, these experiences, something happens. It's meaningful, it's a loss. You can't replace it. What does sadness do? It motivates us to pull back, turn our attention inward, and to make new meaning out of the circumstances that we're now down with. That's a really powerful response. So an emotion is information like sadness is telling me, okay, I need to rethink. How I'm approaching this area of my life because it's not gonna be the same.

Chris Congdon: Yeah, that's such an amazing skillset and yet so hard sometimes. And I want, to talk about that, but I wanna probe in kind of a related area here because I think for a lot of people, we learn early in our careers, our work experience, we get this message that, talking about your emotions at work or experiencing emotions is like you're not supposed to do it. Like, because emotions, I mean, I remember in business school, like, getting this idea that you have to make the most rational decisions and that emotions can steer you away from really leaning into the data or objective, you know, points of information.

And so I'm really curious how you think emotions play a role at work. How do we think about the idea that emotions and work don't go together?

Ethan Kross: Yeah, I, I think it's a bad idea.

Chris Congdon: Okay.

Ethan Kross: And I think it's a bad idea because I think you're encouraging, rather than working with, with the machine and how it's built, you're working against the machine. Human beings are an emotional species. It's part of how we function. There's this wonderful study that tries to quantify the amount of time you spend experiencing an emotion each day. 90% of the time that people were sampled. There were text messages throughout the day and asked what they're feeling, 90% of the time they're experiencing something.

So we are bathing in emotions and as a leader, I am doing my darndest. I don't know if that's an actual word, but we're gonna roll with it to cultivate emotions in a healthy, adaptive way. Among my team, what does that mean? Well, sometimes it's motivating and inspiring and revving them up because I know that's gonna make them more energized to achieve their goal.

Sometimes it's forming an empathic connection because I value them as a human being. I value them as a colleague. And I also know that establishing those empathic bonds creates tighter, more cohesive groups, which are also more likely to perform optimally. Right? So, you know, emotions you don't wanna turn them off. You can't turn them off.

Chris Congdon: Yeah. A couple minutes ago you used the word think and thinking and I feel like talking about cognition feels like, you know, a safer, more comfortable than sometimes talking about our emotions can be. Because, you know, we can intellectualize this whole idea about like, oh, of course cognition is really important because we need people to solve problems. And you know that you do that cognitively. Can you talk about something that you say in the book about cognition and emotions being interconnected?

Ethan Kross: Thinking and feeling are inherently intertwined. And I'm gonna show you it right now, and every one of you who is listening, I'll invite you to join along. Chris, I would like you to right now, think about an experience that, uh, makes you a little anxious. You don't have to tell if you are, but can you think about that experience? Can you recall a moment or something in the future?

Chris Congdon: Yes. Yes.

Ethan Kross: Okay. So we've just used thinking cognition to activate emotion. Right.

Chris Congdon: Okay. My blood pressure just went up too.

Ethan Kross: Yeah. But I'm gonna make it, I'm gonna, I'm gonna lower it now through thinking.

Chris Congdon: Okay. All right.

Ethan Kross: So now I want you to think about the last really wonderful moment you experienced with your family or friends.

Chris Congdon: Oh, that's so easy.

Ethan Kross: Yeah. And I even see a little smile on your face. We just use thinking to generate a positive response. Thoughts predict feelings. Feelings being the subjective experience of an emotion, what you're aware of. Sometimes when we get an immediate fright, that can activate thinking. So the two go hand in hand. You cannot pull them apart. We do not know how to create Spock like robotic individuals who just perform computations. Right? We don't know how to do that, and I don't think we wanna do that.

If you're thinking about your organization, I want to say one more thing about talking about work as well as home. But if we think about our teams sometimes I want my teams to be a little bit edgy about "hey if don't do this well, there are stakes". I want you to recognize that because guess what that does? It zooms your attention in, it focuses you to make sure that you're gonna dot your i's and cross your t's. And we're dealing with the highest levels of performance we expect every i to be dotted, every t to be crossed. so a little emotion there can be good.

The flip side is if we're in a brainstorming mode and it's all about like the next innovation, I want you to be expansive, pie in the sky. I want you Chris to fantasize about what would transform your division, your team if we do this over the next 10 years. That's now a very different emotional frame that's guide you in a different direction.

So thinking and feeling, they go hand-in-hand. We want both. We want to be able to navigate that part of the work.

Chris Congdon: Yeah. Super helpful. You also, I think you've got a lot of really helpful, um, ways of expressing this kind of toolkit that we have to manage our emotions. And I found it really interesting that you broke it down into what you called internal shifters and external shifters and I'd like to explore both of those. So can you just for our listeners tell them like, what is an internal shifter? Like, what is that all about and how could I leverage that?

Ethan Kross: Yeah, so like, you know, our emotions are so unbelievably complex, right? There are things happening and your brain, and your body and your relationships. They're abstract. We can't really see emotions. So one of the things I try to do in the book and in any work I do with organizations is to get to the essence, right?

Really try to make this actionable. And so first, let me just emphasize how I define shifting. Because it's really important. Shifting is the process of managing emotions. And there are three skills that comprise it. It's the ability to turn the volume on your emotion up or down. So to increase or decrease the intensity of a response. Shifting was also about shortening or lengthening how long you stay in an emotional state. So, you know, I appreciate anxiety, but I don't really wanna experience it for really long stretches of time or really intensely. So shifting allows me to rein it in sometimes. Shifting involves moving from one state, let's say anxiety to another altogether, happiness. So shifting is the process of doing those three things. And then the question is, well, how on earth do you shift?

And some of the skills for shifting, they're inside of us. I call those our internal shifters. You carry these shifters around with you wherever you go. You just need to know what they are and how they work. Then there are external shifters. These are tools you can use to manage your emotions that exist. Our relationships, so ways of interacting with other people that can shift us for better or worse in our physical environments, our spaces. This is I think an incredibly underappreciated lever for pushing people's emotions around one three, because I was excited to tap chat with you. And then in our culture too, the organizations and institutions we belong to, they can shift our emotions.

And so there's a lot of shifters to learn about. And yeah, research shows that there's no one size fits all solution. Different tools work for different people. So the real challenge is to learn about what these shifters are and start trying 'em out.

Chris Congdon: Yeah. Well, so I wanna stay on the internal shifters for just a minute longer because like me, I think this area is so interesting 'cause I know that there are a lot of people who probably feel like emotions are just, emotions are the way I feel about things. Like I can't help it. This is how I feel, like I don't have any control over my emotions. And I'm curious what you would say about this, 'cause this idea of shifting that you've talked about, of dialing it up or dialing it down or reducing the duration, like that feels like I'm consciously controlling an emotional experience. But I don't know if everybody feels like that's, is that even possible?

Ethan Kross: Yeah, well, you know, your intuition is right. According to one study, almost 50% of people sampled did not think they could actually shift their emotions. And when I first came across that finding earlier in my career, it was not to be dramatic, you know, if my wife was here, she'd tell me I'm being dramatic, but I'm not, this was like a devastating moment for me. I've dedicated my life to researching this concept of shifting emotions and now 50% of the population is telling me it's not possible.

I thought long and hard about it and I understand where they're coming from, and I have a way of reconciling it that I'm gonna share with you. But before I do, I wanna emphasize that recognizing that you can control your emotions is an essential first step. To get better at managing emotions because if you don't think you can manage your emotions, why would you devote any effort to doing so? There are parts of our emotional life that we cannot control, Chris, I don't know you very well, but I feel pretty confident in saying that. I'm gonna guess sometime over the past two weeks you have experienced a thought. It's just kind of popped up in your head. And it elicited an emotional reaction and you're probably ashamed of that thought, you wouldn't want someone else to know about the thought that popped into your head. Fair to say that you've experienced something like that, a thought that maybe you want, wouldn't want someone else to know?

Chris Congdon: I think that's fairly safe to say. Sure.

Ethan Kross: Yeah. I feel confident in saying that because there's been a lot of research on this phenomenon, and this is a, but

Chris Congdon: I really didn't push that person into traffic. I just, I want you to know I didn't act on.

Ethan Kross: That's a very important distinction. And actually this is universal, we all experience these thoughts that just pop up into our heads. They have an emotional quality to them. They're uncontrolled and we often don't like them. We're not proud of them, interestingly enough, hitting someone else, pushing someone into traffic. These are not uncommon automatic thoughts that people experience. Oh, it's so wild. There's nothing wrong with that.

And I hope that you and everyone who's listening actually, can lean into that because we all experience this at times. This is not something you need to be ashamed of. It's believed to be a byproduct of how the brain works.

Chris Congdon: Okay? So I'm, I'm not like a serial killer, you know, like, okay?

Ethan Kross: No, we can still hang out.

Yeah. You, you okay? I'm not worried. Yes. I'll even introduce you to my family. Okay. Like really no concerns. So we don't have control over those emotionally laden thoughts that often just take hold of us. I think that's why a lot of people think, no, you can't control emotions. But the moment those thoughts are activated, we can begin to do all sorts of things to manage how we engage with those thoughts and how they impact us.

So you did not push that person in front of the truck. That was an act of control. I can experience a super farfetched, like worst case scenario, thought about the next flight I have or my kids and then I can reframe it, I can distract myself from it. I can talk about it with someone else. I can go for a walk in the arboretum near my home to shift my perspective.

There are a number of things I could do to manage my response to that emotion. So we can't control the emotions that are automatically activated, but once they occur, that's our playground. That's what the front part of our brain is partially specialized to help us do.

Chris Congdon: This is good because this leads to something that I really wanted to ask you about. We've talked a little bit about family. So one of the highly academic sources of information that I use to learn about emotions is watching Miss Rachel with my 3-year-old grandson. And we learn that big feelings are okay. I'm not gonna sing the song, but, you know, but big feelings are okay. You know and so like, I think there's a lot of conventional wisdom that would say, well, maybe you should avoid those big feelings. Like, it's too much, so let's just kind of tuck 'em away or forget about them, let it go, you know, that kind of thing. But, you know. You actually challenged that idea that avoiding an idea is always a harmful thing. Like maybe it's okay to avoid sometimes, talk about that.

Ethan Kross: Yeah. So we have a tendency in our culture to throw the baby out with the bath water. That is just, we over generalize and it directly relates to how we think about the process of avoidance. There are hundreds, maybe thousands of studies which demonstrate that chronically avoiding your problems is bad for you.

So in other words, if you have a decision, a coping tactic, anytime something bad happens, I'm just gonna push it away. I'm not gonna think about it. Repress it, suppress it. If that's all you do, not good. That's an extreme response. What we have also learned, however, is you can be a little bit more tactical with your usage of avoidance.

And in fact, if you're tactical with how you use it, it could be really valuable. So let me be concrete there. Chris, have you ever experienced a moment where you, you received an email that, you know, six words into reading the email, you find yourself becoming hot in the collar and angry.

Chris Congdon: Oh, oh, oh, yeah. I don't even wanna think about it. Yes, I have had those moments. Yeah.

Ethan Kross: Yeah. I mean, we all have Right, In that instance, did you respond right away or did you maybe take a couple hours off or maybe a day and then come back to it the next day? Or maybe you've done both versions in your life?

Chris Congdon: Well, I was gonna say in a different, when I was, earlier in my career, I have had moments where I responded quickly and I've, I've learned that work out from that experience that maybe counting to 10, taking a breath, maybe even waiting until the next day, is a much better way to manage the situation.

Ethan Kross: That's right. And I think, I think most, most people would agree, and I certainly have had those too. And so he, here's why waiting, which by the way, is a form of avoidance works. We know that as time goes on, all emotions fade in their intensity. Yeah. So this is another truism that's been documented by scientists.

When you take some time away from a problem, you come back to the problem. Maybe it's gone. Sometimes the things that we think are a big deal, like they just, yeah. They're just, they're not, they're just gone the next, you know, the next hour or day. Sometimes they're still there, but they don't seem quite as big. And it's easier for us to manage that by shifting your attention away from the problem, giving time some opportunity to do what it does, which is to heal you. This can be very valuable. Now, we want flexibility. That is really the key here. You want to be able to shift your attention away from a problem, come back to it later. You may find that, you know what? This problem is just so damn sticky in my mind. I can't distract myself from it.

I'm thinking about it during the meeting if that's happening to you. Here's the really great news. There are like 15 or 20 other things you can do. Other kinds of tools that you can bring into the situation.

Chris Congdon: I wanna move from our internal shifters a little bit, to external shifters. 'cause this gave me some really new things to think about. So I wanna read a quote to you from your book that just really resonated with me.

You wrote that the spaces we inhabit and move through shape our emotional lives. I'm gonna read it one more time 'cause I wanna make sure people hear this, the spaces we inhabit and move through, shape our emotional lives. Tell us about that. Like tell us about how spaces and places impact our emotions as an external shifter.

Ethan Kross: Well, I think of spaces as a tool for managing emotions that are hidden in plain sight. It's just waiting to be activated and some people really, really get it. But a lot of people don't. It's an underappreciated, underutilized tool. And it is, it is really, I, without dramatizing, I think my wife would agree if she was here, it's changed. It's changed the way I live my life down to the routes I take when I walk to work. To how I decorated my home and you know, worked on our landscaping because I know that my surroundings can so powerfully impact how I feel. And this is why I think it is so vitally important for folks who are studying people's inner world to partner with individuals and organizations that are dealing with the external outer world to come together here.

So how do our spaces affect us? Uh, well, it's multi-directional. There are many different ways, and I'll just offer a few. Have you ever, are you familiar with the idea that and when we're growing up, one of the ways that young children learn how to safely navigate the world as they attach to a secure figure in their life. Right? Okay. Yeah. So the concept of attachment.

Kids ideally are positively and securely attached to their parents, their siblings, and the mere presence of those individuals provides a sense of safety and security. So everything's great. When those people are around, right? Well, what we've learned is that we also attach to places to spaces, and we form these emotional attachments such that simply being in those contexts automatically provide us with a sense of safety and security that helps regulate us.

So if you ever watch a spy movie spies have these like safe apartments that they can go to in a foreign city and there are resources for them. When I think about where I live in Ann Arbor, I've got multiple safe houses, right? I've got the arboretum, I've got one of my offices, I have the tea house that I've spent a lot of time writing books in. These are places the moment I go there. I feel safe and secure. So that's one way that our spaces affect us.

Another way they affect us is green spaces. Green spaces are really good for you.. So green spaces provide you with an opportunity to restore. When you feel really depleted, you can let your guard down and take in the beauty around you. They also give you the opportunity to experience the emotion of awe, which is an emotion we experience when we're in the presence of something vast and indescribable. Something that just feels bigger than us.

So the last one I'll mention is when we're taken over by an emotion, we often don't feel like we're in the driver's seat, the emotions taking hold. We don't like that. 'cause we also know that human beings all like to feel in control. It's nice to know that the world is, you know, predictable. We've learned that you can compensate for not feeling in control of yourself by creating order around you. I, do you ever clean or organize when you're upset about something? Have you ever done that?

Chris Congdon: Sure, absolutely. Like sometimes when I'm really upset, this sounds so weird, but like, I mean, I'll literally like clean the bathroom or something, which is kind of weird, but yeah,

Ethan Kross: It doesn't sound weird at all.

It makes total sense given what we know of how the mind works. So you're not feeling in control, but now, hey, guess what? Like, you know, come to my house whenever you want. Like it's a giant mess. Lots of things that I could not very neatly put in order exactly as I want. I'm in control. And so, creating order around you, what we've learned is that it makes you feel more in control of your life.

So it's called, this compensatory control. You're compensating for the lack of control you feel in your mind by. Exerting ordering control around you, so that's another way your spaces can affect you. And it's like this concept of being able to change your location.

Ethan Kross: Oh yeah.

Chris Congdon: So like when I think about that in the workplace, I mean, there are a lot of workplaces that I've been in that they feel pretty uniform. Like everything's the same, it's kind of monochromatic, it's et cetera. But like being able to have places that you can go to that are kind of your work version of a happy place, right?

Ethan Kross: Yeah. You could think about this at different levels and I think it's useful to recognize just how much flexibility you have, how many options you have for intervening. I think one thing that I took away from working on this book is, my God, like there are so many things you could do to manage your emotions.

It's not just mindfulness and meditation. Like if that works for you, great. But there are, you know, 25 other things you could do. So when it comes to your spaces, one thing you could do is switch spaces outright, right? So if you know I'm in a funk at my home office, I'm gonna go to the coffee shop, right? So I can switch my spaces and that's altering lots of things like the people around me, the sensory inputs. Sometimes you don't have that option though. So when you don't have that option, you can also make changes more locally to the space that you're in. You can design your space to impact the emotional experience you want to have. And like, hello, interior design. Right? Like there's all in part, I think a lot of really good interior design is thinking about spaces in terms of the impact they have emotionally on the individual, thinking about colors and light sounds, these are sensory inputs.

So when I first, so earlier in my career, this is maybe, I don't know, 15 or plus years ago when I first started doing some of the research where you, ask people to take a walk in nature versus down Ann Arbor's busy streets, and you find that they go on the nature walk, they think more clearly they're happier.

After doing that work and reading up on it, I started buying plants for my house, for my office, right. The landscape design bills went off because now, hey, I want a tree right out of every window.

Another thing you can do, we did some research years ago where we found that simply glancing at the image of people you love, your family, for example, your friends can help you recover emotionally from problematic experiences. Because when you look at those images, you're automatically reminded that you've got a support network that is there to help you. So what do I do then? I go out and I buy picture frames and I start printing out pictures. And so if you literally, if you came to my office now, you would see tons of pictures of family.

You would see greenery, like different plants. Sadly, a lot of them are dying. That's not good. But that's a different problem. And you'd actually see a really nice landscape around, like within, within view. And so what I've done is at multiple levels, I've designed that space to be restorative in a way that works for me. And I think we all have the opportunity to do that.

Chris Congdon: Yeah. Well, Ethan, over the course of the time that we've talked together, I will admit I had a little anxiety.

Ethan Kross: Oh, no.

Chris Congdon: But no, but I got over it because, well, first of all, you're, you're a nice guy. But you know, it is also just what you said before, you know the emotions. Yeah. Information. You know, it's like this is important, I care. But I also had a lot of fun. This has been a great conversation. I'll even say I had a little spark of joy during our conversation.

Ethan Kross: Well, it was, it was,, it was a pleasure. It was a pleasure for me too.