

Transcript

Ross G 00:07

Hello, you're listening to the Future Talent Learning Podcast developed to help you build your leadership and management skills. I'm Ross Garner.

Ross D 00:14

and I'm Ross Dickey.

Ross G 00:15

This week we are asking are we unhealthily obsessed with mental health? What does mental health mean in an organisational context and is it really good for us to switch off and take a break? To answer these questions we're speaking to Dr Alan Watkins, a physician turned leadership consultant.

Ross G 00:30

Alan runs our leadership consultancy and coaching business called Complete. He also writes on a variety of topics from leadership issues to how we tackle the world's toughest problems. How are you doing Alan?

Alan 00:40

I'm doing very well Ross thank you very much for having me on.

Ross G 00:44

You're very welcome, it's a pleasure to have you here. I wonder if you could get started by describing what we mean by mental health. I'm placing that in an organisational context too.

Alan 00:54

Well, it depends what you mean by we. What I mean by mental health is quite different from what other people mean by mental health, I guess. So it's commonly used as a sort of euphemism for people's feeling of stress, overwhelm, anxiety, worry, depression.

Alan 01:12

So, you know, strongly felt negative emotions. And that's my primary issue with the term, mental health is, in most cases of depression, anxiety, stress and overwhelm, mental processes are normal. So that's why, you know, mental health, in my view, is neither mental nor health.

Ross G 01:35

Could you maybe expand on that a little bit? What do you mean by mental processes are normal? And then what is going wrong?

Alan 01:44

So if you look at the sort of the discipline of cognitive science, you know, thinking how well we think the quality of our think, the logical sequencing of our thought processes, in most cases of anxiety, depression and overwhelm, logical processes are working perfectly adequately.

Alan 02:04

There are only a few relatively sort of rare examples where people who are depressed have problems with their cognition. So mental health condition would be something like schizophrenia, where they misinterpret reality, you know, they have an illusion or delusion, or their timeline of their cognitive process is disordered.

Alan 02:29

That is mental health. Cognitive processes are not functioning as they should do. That is a mental health problem. But when you're anxious or worried or depressed, your ability to create a logical sequence to, you know, you know, think things

through is normal.

Alan 02:48

It might be, you know, dark and discolored, but the actual process of cognition itself is usually normal. And that's why it's not actually mental. It's emotional. In fact, there's quite good evidence to suggest that calling it mental creates a stigma and we then have to have anti-stigma campaigns, which, you know, and you've seen the royals get involved in this because however we feel stigmatised by the label of being called a mental case or you've got a mental health problem, and in many cases the label is more damaging to the individual than the anxiety or depression.

Alan 03:27

The fact that their label is a mental case. So one of the things that we can do, I think the best thing we can do to stop stigmatising is stop calling it mental because it's not even a mental problem.

Alan 03:38

It's an emotional issue, not a mental issue.

Ross D 03:42

Yeah. So one of the things we've seen in recent years, as you say, is this kind of, I can attempt to de-stigmatise what you don't refer to as mental health, but is generally referred to as mental health.

Ross D 03:54

So there's a sort of accepted phrase that everyone has mental health. So it doesn't just apply to people who have clinical diagnoses of depression or anxiety, but to everybody. So I could perhaps feel depressed, but I don't have necessarily have to have a diagnosis of depression.

Ross D 04:13

So it's encouraging people to think about these things and acknowledge that these are emotional issues that everybody suffers from, perhaps to some degree. So how do you sort of parse that distinction?

Alan 04:26

Well, a thought isn't a feeling, and a feeling isn't a thought. People are confused about these terms, you know, it's like saying, you know, my shoulder and my elbow are different bones. They are different bones, you know.

Alan 04:38

We have to be able to differentiate from this, from that. My shoulder from my elbow. A thought from a feeling. But a lot of people can't make that distinction, which is why, you know, a lot of doctors, a lot of mental health professionals don't make that distinction.

Alan 04:51

I've read so many documents where they confuse this terminology. So, and you can do this experiment, I mean, ask any leader how they feel, and they'll usually tell you how they think. So, I'll give you a live example.

Alan 05:06

You know, how was your, Frank, how was your day? Oh, had a terrible day. Yeah, how do you feel about that? Uh, well, I didn't get my job done. No, no, that's a thought. How do you feel about not getting your job done?

Alan 05:19

And then they look really baffled and they go, well, I got home and I hadn't done what I wanted. It's another thought. No, no, no, how do you feel when you got home and you hadn't done what you want?

Alan 05:29

So, spontaneously, a lot of people cannot offer you the feeling. They just keep giving you a thought because they don't make the distinction between a thought and a feeling. Now, when you leave the witness and go, look, Frank, I'm asking, did you feel annoyed, frustrated, disappointed?

Alan 05:44

Oh, oh, oh, oh, right, I've got you now. So, when you leave the witness, they can give you a feeling. But spontaneously, they just keep giving you thoughts. And it's because they don't make this distinction.

Alan 05:55

So, many people in the field, many doctors, you know, many therapists, you know, merge thinking and feeling into the same phenomena, and we can discuss why that is. But a failure to differentiate then makes the assumption that there's something wrong with your cognition, there's something wrong with your mentation, your thought processes, when usually the case is there's nothing wrong with your thought processes.

Alan 06:21

So, we shouldn't be calling you mental, you know, it's emotional. And it's not a health issue either, it's not mental health, it's a development issue, right? So, when we call it mental health, we're calling it something that it isn't that creates a stigma and sets hairs racing to try and solve a cognitive problem that doesn't even exist.

Alan 06:42

When we understand it's actually about emotional development, suddenly we're on the right path, where we need to learn to regulate our emotions more effectively and develop those skills, which will get us off the planet of depression, off the planet of anxiety, off the planet of overwhelm and all these things, and then suddenly we can do something about it, and certainly we're not stigmatised.

Ross G 07:05

I think the term mental health's possibly gone the other way, though, where it is no longer a stigma. I mean, it's probably to some people it is. But in the kind of the general population is talked about so often that if you were to say, oh, I've had mental health difficulties, that's not even particularly rare now.

Ross G 07:19

And so one of the reasons for that will be because of it's, I think it's what you would call rampant overuse to apply to all sorts of different things. But in the workplace, I think it'd be safer to say, I have mental health difficulties than to say, I'm stressed and struggling to cope.

Ross G 07:34

Or I am upset about this thing that happened. Because we are not allowed to talk about our emotions in the workplace. Work is where serious things happen. You can keep that emotional stuff at home. Do you think that's a fair observation?

Alan 07:47

No, because, you know, we work with a hundred multinationals, and I can tell you for a fact that, again, that most people don't feel they can talk about their mental health issues with their line manager.

Alan 08:02

And so just even though we've had all these big campaigns with royal backing to de-stigmatise out there in the field, there's still a massive stigmatisation going on. And even if there wasn't, you know, even if your hypothesis was correct, you know, we're diagnosing the problem as our shoulder when the problem is really our elbow.

Alan 08:24

So it takes us down the wrong path. And I'm, you know, if we're going to solve anything, we have to face the truth. I mean, you know, if we don't solve, if we don't admit the truth of climate change, we can never solve climate change.

Alan 08:37

We've got to face the realities it really is, rather than some slightly well-intentioned but misguided focus on the issue. To try and solve mental health problems is like throwing buckets of water around on the fourth floor of the building when the fire is actually in the basement.

Alan 08:55

It doesn't get you to the solution fast. Whereas when you actually realise what the problem is, it's to do with emotional wellbeing and emotional regulation and emotional development, suddenly you're dealing with the issue.

Alan 09:06

Now, other issues arise, you know, particularly for men. Can we really talk about our emotions? And that's a profound misunderstanding about the nature of emotions. So we need to understand what emotions are and start talking about them.

Alan 09:24

And so emotions are really, you know, energy in motion. It's just biological data. So when you feel angry, for example, there is a very specific biological signature underpinning that. When you feel anxious is a different biological signature.

Alan 09:42

So, for example, your heart's pounding. When you're anxious, your heart might be doing, you know, 110 beats per minute. You know, your palms are sweaty, your mouth is dry, your stomach is churning. These are biological data streams which, when you integrate them all together, make an emotion.

Alan 10:01

An emotion is simply energy in motion. And if you feel that data, if you tune into that data, if you're aware of that data, it becomes a feeling. So every single second of every single day, all human beings, particularly men, or, you know, men as much as women, you know, have an emotion every single second of every single day.

Alan 10:22

We don't all feel it because we're not tuning into the data. So the emotion is always there, but the question is whether we're feeling it. Now, if we collapse all of this biology, emotions, and feeling, and make it all cognition, we're ignoring three really critical dimensions of who we are, which underpin another foundation of our performance, our identity, our ability to make decisions.

Alan 10:46

So we've got two narrow and shallow an understanding of the human system. And that's why, if you look at the data, mental health seems to be getting worse. I mean, I saw some data this week saying up to 50% of people through the pandemic are now struggling with their mental health.

Alan 11:05

Well, that's disastrous. And part of the reason the struggle was we're confused. We've collapsed the bottom three levels of the human system, biology, emotions, and feeling, into cognition. These are not the same thing.

Alan 11:16

And until we realise that, we can't actually solve the problem.

Ross G 11:21

Well, why don't we separate those things out then? So if I understood you right, mental health problems would be relatively rare from a medical point of view. And actually, the things that, because a lot of issues are worked, tend to be around emotional development.

Ross G 11:39

Is that right?

Alan 11:40

Correct. Well, they're not that rare, but I mean, they're much rarer, because if you look at the entirety of it, a lot of them are emotional, not mental. So they would be rarer, though, not that rare.

Ross G 11:52

Yeah, sure. More rare than the popular media would suggest. And so how would those emotional issues manifest themselves at work? And what are some of the things that you would do or managers can do to help in that situation?

Alan 12:08

Right. So if anybody's sort of noticed a two-year-old child – now, one of the things that happens with a two-year-old child is they're not – they've yet to develop the ability to regulate their emotions.

Alan 12:17

So if they don't get the chocolate they want, they'll spin around in a wheel in the supermarket aisle screaming and ranting that they want the chocolate, right? Or if they're annoyed, they're going, you know, kick rot in the shins, right?

Alan 12:29

So they can't regulate their emotion very well. And then they become four years old and they think, well, actually, that's not a very effective strategy if I kick my dad or my mum in the shins. They're definitely not going to give me the chocolate.

Alan 12:42

So they learn a degree of emotional regulation, but it's not very sophisticated. So what happens is those six-year-olds get older and older, but a certain level of that evolution, their emotional regulation skills stop maturing.

Alan 12:59

And then eventually they become a CEO. So their ability to regulate their emotion might still be at the level of an eight-year-old or a 12-year-old. And we see that in bullying in the workplace, you know, or egocentricity in the workplace, you know, that my ego is so fragile I've got to get one over on everybody to feel good about myself, or I've got to put you down in order to elevate myself, or I'm just going to lean into you in an inappropriate and unhelpful way.

Alan 13:32

So you see a lot of aberrant behavior in the workplace, you know, oh, I feel, you know, anxious or worried what people think about me or any of these things. Why? Because I'm really struggling to regulate my emotion because at some stage on my development, I stopped, you know, maturing my emotional regulation skills.

Alan 13:54

So it's really an issue of emotional development and then we medicalise it and we say it's a health issue. Well, it's not really a health issue. That's like saying pregnancy is an illness. Well, it isn't.

Alan 14:07

Pregnancy is a normal thing, right? And emotional regulation and emotional development is a normal developmental process and we shouldn't medicalise it and we shouldn't call it what it isn't, which is mental or cognition.

Alan 14:20

It's emotional development. And when we get good at regulating emotion, which is how do you sort this out, is we actually teach people how to, first of all, understand what emotion they're experiencing.

Alan 14:32

So if I asked you now, Ross, you know, how do you feel right now? What would you say to me? How do you feel right now?

Ross G 14:39

Uh, a little bit anxious. I mean, I'm always feel sort of relatively anxious when doing one of these podcasts.

Alan 14:44

Okay, so you're anxious, right?

Ross G 14:47

Slightly. Don't know where it's going to go.

Alan 14:48

Right. OK, you don't know where it's going to go. So I say, well, do you really feel anxious or do you feel nervous? Or do you feel worried? Do you even understand the difference between anxious, nervous or worried?

Alan 14:59

And could you give me an accurate distinction of those three steps? Most people can't.

Ross G 15:05

No, I would have said anxious was a more acceptable thing to say, than nervous or worried. That's not necessarily a comment on how I feel, that's just me performing.

Alan 15:13

But within your own system, can you actually tell the difference between anxiety, nervousness and worry? And you go, well, not easy. No, I wouldn't think so. No, exactly. And most people can't, right? So when we ask them these questions, we ask these sort of questions all the time.

Alan 15:27

You know, how do you feel, Frank? Fine. Okay. So you say you feel fine, but maybe what you're actually feeling is not bad. Maybe what you're actually feeling is so-so. Maybe what you're actually feeling is all right.

Alan 15:36

Do you even understand the difference between these things? I have no idea what you're talking about. So our literacy, most people can only really differentiate about a dozen emotions. And there are, in fact, 34 ,000.

Alan 15:50

So we can identify 12, or well done, Frank, you've got 12 in a universe of 34. So your literacy is close to zero. And when we've got such poor emotional literacy, it's no wonder we've got all regulation, because we don't even make the distinction between, say, excitement and anxiety.

Alan 16:10

So when people, you know, do public speaking, or they're on stage, or they're running a town hall meeting or something, you know, they go off, I feel anxious, you know, but that's okay, because, you know, sometimes, you know, we need a bit of anxiety to help us perform.

Alan 16:24

That's not true. Anxiety will undermine your performance. Maybe what you're actually feeling is excited, but you can't tell the difference between anxiety and excitement. You lump them all into anxiety.

Alan 16:36

So our literacy is very poor men and women. And therefore, our ability to regulate, because if you don't know what planet you're on, which of the 34 ,000 planets are you on in the universe of emotions, you know which planet you're on, you're lost, right?

Alan 16:50

You don't know where you are. And so how can you possibly regulate? Because the antidote to frustration, the commonest emotion in business, the antidote to frustration is very different than the antidote to anger.

Alan 17:02

But if you can't tell the difference between anger and frustration, you can't actually fix it effectively.

Ross D 17:08

Well, the most common prescribed antidote to all of these things is just for people to switch off and take a break. You mentioned the pandemic, and one of the things that we heard a lot through the pandemic is that work and life were increasingly bleeding into one another and people were finding it harder to switch off, to what extent is switching off and taking a break actually the right remedy?

Ross D 17:30

I'm pretty sure you don't think it is.

Alan 17:31

And, well, let me ask you this, Ross, is it even biologically possible to turn off your biology? Well, number one, it's not possible to stop your heart beating, to stop your lungs, you know, breathing in and out, to stop changes in body temperature and muscle tone, every single second of every single day you have an emotion.

Alan 17:54

It's not only not possible to turn that off, you shouldn't want to, because it's emotion that informs and enables your ability to decide anything. So if I summarise 50 years of neuroscience on the neuroscience of decision-making, it all boils down to this one phrase, every decision you ever make, Ross, is basically a feeling justified by logic.

Alan 18:20

So to make a decision, you have to have first a feeling and then you hunt around for data to just... So maybe your other half says to you, Ross, what do you want for dinner tonight? And like most men, you go, I don't know, food?

Alan 18:32

Now, let's have some food. I mean, let's not eat my shoe. Let's have food, you know, that's what will happen. So you can't really make it, you don't really care, you know, just eat anything, whatever's in the cupboard.

Alan 18:43

And then some other nights, the same question, what do you want for dinner? Curry. You'll make a decision. Now, if you analyse that moment of choice, what actually happens is you have a feeling, right, I'd like curry tonight, and then you scramble around to justify the feeling.

Alan 19:02

So your other half says, well, why do you want curry? Well, we haven't been out for a week, you know, there's a nice curry house just open down the road, you know, we get away from the kids, no washing up, all the logical justification.

Alan 19:14

So in business, when you were doing a merger and acquisition, you know, should we have company A or company B, you know, and you'll do a data analysis of, you know, all the reasons for A and all the reasons for B.

Alan 19:25

But the truth is the moment of choice, you put your finger in the air and go, B, and then somebody says, why do you want to buy company B, not company A, and then you scramble around, because you know what, B feels like the right decision.

Alan 19:39

So the moment of deciding anything in life is actually a feeling and a feeling is underpinned by emotion, and emotion is underpinned by our biology. So not only can you not switch off, it's not advisable to switch off, because actually, if you shut down all emotional data, you cannot make a decision.

Alan 20:00

And there's a very famous case in neuroscience, the case of Phineas Gage, where this is a guy working on the railways in the 1850s, and, you know, he was building tunnels. And it was his job was to drill a hole in the rock, and put some dynamite in, and then set the fuse, and explode, and built the rock.

Alan 20:17

And one day he wasn't paying attention. And as he put the tamping iron into the rock, he forgot to put the sand in. So as the iron went into the rock, it caught a spark, it lit the fuse, the dynamite exploded, and a 12-foot pole went through his eyeball and right way through his brain.

Alan 20:33

And what it did is it disconnected the emotional centers from his brain, from the logic centers. And actually, he survived the accident, and what they discovered after the accident, he could not make any decisions.

Alan 20:45

He couldn't make any decisions. So sort of simple logic worked. So if you say walks two plus two, you say four. A is to B, as C is to D. But if you ask too many questions, do you want your next appointment next Tuesday or next Thursday?

Alan 20:59

I don't know. Do you want to have dinner with your wife or with my wife? I don't know. He couldn't decide, because he didn't have a feeling one way or the other. So that clued up the neuroscience community that actually you need to feel something in order to decide.

Alan 21:16

Even if you want to decide whether what I'm saying right now is true or nonsense, you first feel whether what I'm saying is true or nonsense, and then you scramble around to bolster your feeling with every bit of evidence you've ever read, every book you've ever read, and either agree with me or disagree with me.

Alan 21:35

But it's a logical recruitment after you've had a feeling. So not only can you not switch it off, you shouldn't want to. And actually, if you did, you wouldn't be able to make a decision in your life.

Ross G 21:46

So you've raised the possibility that what you just said might be nonsense. And I wondered if anyone in the audience is listening to this and thinking, well, when I acquire businesses, I take a very robust financial approach and I'll look at it and I'll make an informed objective decision.

Ross G 22:03

What Alan's talking about is nonsense. And I know that's the case because I've gone through this process. I think what you would say is, well, that's fine, but that's just how you feel. So it's kind of a trap.

Ross G 22:12

There's like, there's no way for people to disagree with you.

Alan 22:15

Now, let me put it this way, Ross. When I'm talking to, you know, the most hard-bitten, if you go and speak to the most hard-bitten rational neuroscientists, the game is over. Even they won't argue that there's this independent thing called rationality which exists without emotion.

Alan 22:33

The most hard-bitten neuroscientists won't dispute that anymore. It used to be disputed. I mean, it may not have made it into the awareness of some people, but even the most hard-bitten neuroscientists say, you know, there's no such thing as rationality independent of emotion.

Alan 22:50

So, that debate is over in neuroscience because the evidence is very, very clear. So, when I'm arguing with other doctors about this, oh, well, we're evidence-based, you know, our medical practice is evidence-based, I say, well, what evidence?

Alan 23:02

Well, this paper that was published in the New England Journal of Medicine, you know, well, how do you know it's true? Well, of course it's true. Well, how do you know it's true? Maybe the guy lied. It wouldn't do that.

Alan 23:12

Well, why not? Well, he comes from Harvard. So, well, Harvard people don't buy. Why not? Well, you know, I feel like I can trust them. You know, so when you start digging away and scraping at it, you know, it's our feeling about the legitimacy of a source of information.

Alan 23:30

It's our feeling about the legitimacy of a certain publication. We feel this data is correct. And so, you know, that's what really drives that decision. So, when you're hiring people, you know, you look at the CV of one person and the other CV is not as good.

Alan 23:50

But I don't know, there's something, I get a feeling about this other person, particularly if I've interviewed them, you know, I liked them, I think they slightly undersold themselves on their CV. You actually decide on what you feel and then you scramble around and you will then dismiss data.

Alan 24:05

Ah, yes. Well, I think they slightly over egg their selling points there or they slightly massage the data to make it look better than it really. You're actually really deciding on, based on how you feel about that candidate or that candidate company and then you'll co-opt and bend and distort the data to align with what you feel is correct.

Alan 24:27

So, there's no such thing as rationality, really.

Ross G 24:31

So, I mean, this is taking a more existential turn than I thought. Um, what if I were to ask you, uh, so what if all decisions are based on a feeling there's nothing we can do to game is up, we might as well, I'll just pretend that we're rational or what would you advise?

Alan 24:49

Most people are pretending that they're rational, but they don't understand how the human system works, and it's not a question of, oh, we're helpless, what can we do? No, I'm saying very clearly, there's an awful lot you can do, and first of all, develop your emotional literacy.

Alan 25:02

Understand the concept of emotions. They're just energy in motion. It's biological energy changing, and that's the electrical signals that your heart generates, the pressure waves that your lungs generate, the sound waves that your stomach generates.

Alan 25:20

If you take all of those biological signals from every bodily system, that's what an emotion is. It's just energy in motion, so I don't know why we're all scared about it. It's just data. It's just composite biological data.

Alan 25:31

That's all it is. That's all an emotion is, and a feeling is the awareness of that data in our mind, and that if we understand that, and then we start to learn, well, okay, let me develop some awareness of all these different emotional states.

Alan 25:44

Let me move my literacy from understanding just 12, and a lot of people don't even know 12 emotions and can't distinguish 12 emotions. If I can master a bigger array, then it makes me more empathic. Imagine this, Ross.

Alan 26:00

Somebody comes into your office as a manager in a state of despair. You don't recognise the state of despair because the only two motions you understand are yuck and not bad, right? So you look at them in a state of despair, and you think, well, they're not experiencing not bad.

Alan 26:20

They must be feeling yuck. They don't feel yuck. They feel despair, but you don't recognise that because you only understand two emotions, and one of them is not despair. So you can't empathise with them, and you can't connect with them effectively.

Alan 26:32

Now, imagine you expand your emotional literacy beyond not bad and yuck, and you take in up to 50 emotions, and you now studied them and understood them. One of them is despair. As soon as that person comes in in a state of despair, you instantly recognise what it is because you know what it is in your system, and you can see it in their system.

Alan 26:52

So your ability to develop empathy and rapport with another colleague or a customer is unbelievably dependent on your emotional literacy. And therefore, if you can develop empathy and rapport, you can build relationships, and relationships are the primary driver of business success.

Alan 27:11

I mean, that's what a company is. Companies are breaking bread with other people. That's the whole origin. You know, we are social animals, and we have to develop our interpersonal skills, one of which is empathy and rapport, and that's underpinned.

Alan 27:26

If you can't regulate your emotion, if something goes wrong, and you get massively angry, you're not aware you're getting angry, you can't regulate your anger, you're just angry with everybody, then you're creating a fear culture, and you see at least a lot, of course, in organisations.

Alan 27:40

And the root problem is your inability to regulate your anger. So it has profound effects, not only in business, but on society at large. So until we understand below cognition, there is feeling, and below feeling there is emotion, and below emotion, there is biology.

Alan 27:58

We have to understand these three levels, study them, and get control of them, and then we can get control of our own consciousness, and then we can get control of our own performance. So when you see, and we've coached CEOs and sportsmen, professional athletes, most people can be brilliant sometimes, but they can't be brilliant every day because they don't know what's causing it.

Alan 28:18

And, you know, we talk about, oh, they've lost form, or they've lost confidence. Well, what do you think that really is? It's an emotion, right? Confidence is an emotion, right? Oh, well, the confidence seems to have evaporated somehow or somewhere, and we can't get it back.

Alan 28:34

Well, it's because you don't understand what it is. Actually, once you understand what it is, you can turn it on and then be confident more of the time. And if you could imagine this, you could be confident, not anxious when you're doing these podcasts.

Alan 28:47

You'd smash these podcasts every time, Ross.

Ross G 28:51

Well, I mean, I like to think I do anyway, but I take your point. So let's speak to, I think, final question, because we're almost at time, it's sort of flown past this one. What is the issue that I think a lot of organisations are trying to solve when they're tackling mental health issues?

Ross G 29:08

And so it's a general, ill-defined sense that people are struggling to cope. And so they will launch things like fruit bowls, massages, gym memberships, mindfulness apps through the organisation and see what else.

Ross G 29:23

I'm going to predict that you don't think those are an effective solution. So assuming that that prediction is correct, what should organisations and managers be doing? Let's say aside from hiring your consultancy.

Alan 29:36

Well, so they might help sometimes, but the question is why do they help? So when a fruit bowl helps or a glass of water or a count to ten or take a day off, why does it help? It's because in that break from the activity or in the distraction with eating a banana is we momentarily feel a bit better.

Alan 29:55

So it's the shift in our energy, it's the shift in how we feel that is the active ingredient of any of those things. So all we're really saying is, you know, those well-intentioned things may or may not work, but actually why don't you just go for the jugular?

Alan 30:11

Why don't you go for the real problem, which is people's ability to regulate their emotion and teach them how to do that? Because that's the active ingredient of any intervention that really works. So if you look at somebody going to a gym, you know, you put a gym in for an office of 100 people and, you know, 90 people are too busy and too overwhelmed with their work to even get to the gym.

Alan 30:29

And ten people wander to and from back in their lycra. And so those ten people have got better because they've gone to the gym and they feel better with their, you know, opiate surge after half an hour of heavy exercise.

Alan 30:40

And the other 90 people just feel guilty that they didn't get to the gym. So now the gym has made the overall mental health for the workforce of 100 worse. So well-intentioned, 90 people now feel worse because they've not only got the overwhelm, they've got the guilt of not getting to the gym.

Alan 30:57

So these things can be well-intentioned but actually make the data worse, which is kind of what we're seeing. So all we're really saying is understand how your system really works and go for the problem that's really at the root of all these things, which is how you really feel.

Alan 31:13

Because I've seen plenty of people that go to the gym and they're only going because their wife's bullying them into it, they

don't really want to go, they don't enjoy it, right? And you see there and you measure their biology and it's actually deteriorating even though they're going to the gym, you know, five days a week.

Alan 31:26

And so it's how you feel about what you're doing that is having most of the biological impact than actually what you're doing. I mean, what's, you know, you had today, you know, what did you eat for lunch?

Alan 31:37

Oh, I had a salad. The biological impact of a salad is negligible with the feeling of virtuosity may last a week. You might be bragging next week Ross that you had a salad, right? That'll last a lot longer than the actual salad itself.

Alan 31:49

So that's all I'm saying is focus on the thing that really moves the dial and stop getting distracted with the thing that doesn't really move the dial. That's all I'm really saying.

Ross G 32:00

I know that this would be the last question, but I'll ask another one. You're making that sound really easy, but actually I think it's really difficult, particularly if you are then responsible for a team of people who don't share that understanding, even if you were to raise your own awareness of your emotions, then you've got to lead a team of people who have more idea.

Alan 32:20

Right. So most people live in a life of victimhood, right? How I feel is based on somebody else. I, you upset me, Ross. You did it to me, right? And that's how most people go through their life, thinking the government's doing it to them, their bosses, their colleagues, somebody else.

Alan 32:37

You know, they're pointing the finger at somebody. You know, you, you made me feel bad. You did it to me, right? And I'm pointing the finger. You're the problem, Ross. You upset me. And if I think you upset me, then it's up to you to make me feel better.

Alan 32:53

And of course, you don't. So as I taught my four boys, you know, from a very early age, stop pointing the finger at anybody else. Remember, when you point the finger at somebody else, three fingers are pointing at you.

Alan 33:03

So here's the real culprit, right? You did it to yourself, right? I mean, when you got angry, did Ross inject you with chemicals that created anger? No. Did Ross force tablets down your throat that created the biology of anger?

Alan 33:17

No. So who really created the anger? That would be yourself. So we've got to get off this victimhood where we think somebody else is doing it to you. Nobody's doing anything to you. You're doing it to yourself in response.

Alan 33:31

That doesn't mean people don't behave badly. Of course, people behave badly all the time, but who creates the chemistry in my body? That would be me. So if I can accept that simple truth, nobody's doing it to me.

Alan 33:42

I'm doing all of it to myself. So when I felt happy, who did that? I did. When I feel disappointed, who did that? I did. If you can accept that simple truth, your life will change forever. So you start to look at yourself.

Alan 33:56

You look in the mirror, not out the window. You start to look at yourself as the source. That is emotional sovereignty. You take radical ownership of how you feel. That is the first step to solving the problems that you're experiencing.

Alan 34:10

If you keep believing something else, the government's doing it to me, the customers, my kids, my wife, my husband, whoever it is, somebody else is doing it to me, then it's up to somebody else to fix it.

Alan 34:20

And they don't, so you stay stuck. If you take the ownership yourself, you can change it. If you don't own it, you can't change it. So until people own it, they won't get better.

Ross G 34:32

Well, that's a nice call to action to end on. I am very intrigued what people will think of this discussion afterwards. I hope we'll get some feedback from listeners. Ross, what are you taking? Let's get some feedback from you.

Ross G 34:47

What are you taking from this conversation this week?

Ross D 34:51

So I think for me, it's about the, um, I think the impulse to be able to switch off stress or anxiety, uh, nervousness is quite attractive, but I'm not even sure if this is what Alan was saying, but I think actually it, it's a sort of, I think in, in organisations, generally there's this sort of aesthetic of objectivity where every kind of emotional decision has to be justified with some sort of logical explanation behind it.

Ross D 35:24

And actually I think there's a lot of wisdom in our emotions. So why is it, am I feeling stressed and what can I do to Alan's nodding for the listeners, you obviously can't see this.

Ross G 35:34

But it is nodding along with Ross right now.

Ross D 35:38

What can I do to address that rather than trying to, you know, I mean, I'm going to, after this podcast, I'm going to go and medicate my stress by going for a run, which I think will make me feel better, but I wouldn't necessarily, I'm running away from the problem rather than, you know, thinking about what I can do to address it tomorrow.

Ross D 35:52

So I think that's the main takeaway from me.

Ross G 35:57

I would consider myself something of a modern man in touch with his feelings and able to relate to others with ease. I suspect that's misguided. I am essentially a caveman and have no understanding at all about my own emotions.

Ross G 36:14

I am intrigued to go and list as many emotions as I can after this and see how close I can get to 34,000. I'm not certain I'm going to break double figures, but we'll see.

Alan 36:27

But nothing else, Ross, is I've been a little bit deliberately provocative to try and stimulate some thinking. And people are listening to this and say, well, look, is any of this true? Let me go and have a look at this stuff.

Alan 36:38

Let me go and, you know, is it possible that I can learn to control my own emotion? And I'm saying, absolutely, you know, we've taught this for 25 years and we've seen tons and tons of evidence is you can learn to do this for yourself.

Alan 36:51

It's skills, not pills. So Ross, when you go for your run, you'll get the endorphin surge and you'll feel better for half an hour. But once the endorphins have subsided, you know, the real benefit from that run is how you feel about the fact that you did a run.

Alan 37:06

That feeling of virtuosity could last a week. You know, you could be bragging to your mates. So the primary biological benefit of the run is not the endorphin kick that will lift your spirits for, you know, half an hour, which is why people get addicted to exercise, is the fact about how you feel about running.

Alan 37:22

So again, it goes back to that same thing. So I'm just trying to provoke some curiosity in your listeners to try and go and

study how the human system really works. It's unbelievably beautiful and fascinating.

Alan 37:35

And you can learn to control an awful lot more of how you function than you realise you can. That's all I'm really trying to provoke people into, a bit of curiosity.

Ross G 37:46

You've certainly done that. It's not even that I thought I couldn't control my emotions, it's that it's never occurred to me I might need to. I've never given it any thought before. So I am going to dig deeper. There we go.

Ross G 37:59

In fact, if you could recommend some resources, we'll put some links in the show notes. That would be a useful... Where should I be looking?

Alan 38:06

Well, you can look on our website, complete-coherence.com. You can search for any of the five TED talks I've done. Just type into YouTube, Dr. Alan Watkins, you'll find some of my TED talks. I've written 10 books.

Alan 38:20

The one that's particularly relevant to this podcast is a book that now it's in its second edition called *Coherence, The Science of Exceptional Leadership and Performance*. If you're interested in the wider applications, you can find most of these books on Amazon.

Alan 38:38

So go there. So just Google Dr. Alan Watkins, see if you can find me, email me if you like. We're working with 100 multinational corporations from the CEO downwards. Just trying to teach them that when, at the early stages, when they learn some, develop some emotional literacy, emotional regulation, people make better decisions.

Alan 38:59

And therefore, they get better performance and better commercial outcomes. And in the early stage of the journey, learning to expand your emotional repertoire is a critical skill for any leader, for any person, any professional athlete.

Alan 39:16

So I just get curious about your own system. I mean, it is beautiful and amazing. And go and study it a bit more. You'd be amazed at what the human system is capable of.

Ross G 39:28

All right. Brilliant.

Ross G 39:34

Let's move on now to our regular feature. One thing I've learned this week, I'm pretty sure something we've picked up over the past seven days. Ross, do you want to go first?

Ross D 39:43

Yes. So as I have mentioned ad nauseam on this podcast, I'm running my first marathon later this year and I've been looking to invest in some new running shoes. And part of me was wondering if, because running shoes are very expensive, part of me was thinking, is this all just fancy marketing and every pair of shoes is as good as any other.

Ross D 40:03

I should just go and get some like 50 pound trainers and they'll be just as good as any other. I hadn't heard about this before, but there was a symbol across the Nike Vapor Flies, which were almost banned before the 2020 Olympics.

Ross D 40:21

Because they gave, they were judged to give an unfair advantage to runners who ran in them. So Elliot Kipchoge, who holds the record for a marathon, ran a subfour marathon, wore them. And they've actually studied the effects of these shoes and found that they give a person's running economy, improve the person's running economy by four to five percent, which for an elite runner translates into one minute to 90 second improvement in pace.

Ross D 40:55

But more for that, for like an average runner like myself. So they're very expensive. They're like 250 pounds. Don't know if I'm going to get some, but I thought it was interesting. It sort of raises the whole sort of question of like technological doping and, you know, what is fear when it comes to these sorts of things.

Ross D 41:13

So yeah, that's what I learned this week.

Ross G 41:18

You could do another 20 minutes on that, but let's move on. Alan what you learned this week?

Alan 41:24

Well, I'm reading a very interesting book at the moment called *The Order of Time* by Carlo Rovelli, and I've learned that time as a phenomena, as a concept, is much trickier than we think. So, for example, time passes more slowly at sea level than it does at altitude, and time passes more slowly if you're moving fast than if you're stationary.

Alan 41:48

So, if you're stationary at altitude, time passes much faster and you'll age much more quickly. So, actually, I'm really fascinated by the concept of time and how we experience time, and it's a much trickier concept than we think when we think in very basic terms about time.

Alan 42:10

When we talked about emotion today, time is also a very tricky and complex concept, so that's what I've been thinking and learning about this week.

Ross G 42:18

I just listened to *Project Hail Mary* on Audible, which is by Andy Weir who wrote *The Martian*, which is about a guy who goes off into spaceship. It's all about how much time is passing for him versus the people back home and all that kind of stuff.

Ross G 42:33

I don't understand it at all.

Alan 42:36

Well, to that point where I said by May, when the Martian sends a signal back to Earth, we're not experiencing the same now, because by the time that signal from Mars reaches us, it's not the same moment as when it left.

Alan 42:48

So actually over large distances, interplanetary distances, there's no such thing as now, which is an interesting idea in and of itself. And you'll see that if somebody has a broadcast from Australia, you're not experiencing the same moment, there's a time delay, correct?

Alan 43:04

So there's no such thing as now. So I'll leave you that with a little mindworm to noodle on. There's no such thing as now, really.

Ross G 43:14

A few mindworms in this podcast. There's a lot of people rocking back and forth on the floor right now trying to work out how the world works. I'll end with some flippancy and nonsense. So I wanted to recommend a Twitter thread by The Cultural Tutor.

Ross G 43:28

That's at The Cultural Tutor on Twitter. The thread was titled, *The Danger of Minimalist Design and the Death of Detail*, and the author has a series of photographs showing how minimalist design is now present everywhere.

Ross G 43:44

And not consciously minimalist, but unconsciously minimalist, where we've removed all detail from everything. So some examples, the red telephone box now replaced by the BT phone box. Those wooden benches with ornate handles outside a modern office block.

Ross G 43:59

You'd probably see one that's basically metal bars welded together. Basically any modern office block anywhere in the world looks more or less the same. It'll be glass and steel, similar shape. And then you had a picture of the interior of a house, which looked staggeringly like my own living room.

Ross G 44:17

All white and grey with very little objects everywhere. And the author concludes, suddenly everything everywhere starts to look the same. Absolute neutrality, no detail, no identity. What does that say about us?

Ross G 44:30

It was a fun thread, and in fact, possibly more existential than I intended to. So all sorts of things to think about after this podcast. On that note, I'd like to say thanks to Alan for the provocative podcast today.

Ross G 44:44

Thanks to Ross for his contributions as ever. You've been listening to the Future Talent Learning Podcast with me, Ross Garner. Until next time, bye for now.